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I AM NOT AN ISLAND

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Ek Ladki

Zaafran ke Phool

Main Kaun Hoon?

Saat Hindustani

Inqilab

Outside India

Return of the Red Rose

That Woman

I AM NOT AN ISLAND

An Experiment in Autobiography

KHWAJA AHMAD ABBAS



VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD
New Delhi Bombay Bangalore Calcutta Kanpur

VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD
5 Ansari Road, New Delhi 110002
Savoy Chambers, 5 Wallace Street, Bombay 400001
10 First Main Road, Gandhi Nagar, Bangalore 560009
80 Canning Road, Kanpur 208004
8/1-B Chowringhee Lane, Calcutta 700016

PHOTOGRAPHS: F. ROBINSON

ISBN 0 7069 0477 X

1V02A1601

Rs 45

**Printed at Dhawan Printing Works, 20-A Mayapuri,
New Delhi 110064**

*No man is an island, entire of itself
Every man is a piece of the continent. . . .
Every man's death diminishes me
Because I am involved in Mankind,
And, therefore, never send to know for whom
the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee*

JOHN DONNE

Preface

This book was begun on my 60th birthday. By the time it was finished, more than two years had passed.

There was every chance that such a book could not be written—or at least, not completed.

It was begun at the insistence of a friend. When he suggested to me to write my autobiography I said who would be interested in the autobiography of a jack-of-all-trades like me? He said that is just the point—many more people would be interested to read about politics, literature and films.

So the work was begun. But when the book was half-finished, I was nearly finished. First there was something wrong with my eyes which was diagnosed by ophthalmologists as cataract of both eyes. Then there was the cerebral stroke which completely paralyzed me though it was only for half a night—it could have been fatal but for Dr Singhal the neurologist, and Dr Gandotra, my family physician. Dr Singhal tested my reflexes in his own Bombay Hospital, and later in the Tata Memorial Hospital I was subjected to atomic X-rays. Still Dr Singhal was not satisfied and he said he would be sure of my future health if I had the E.M.I. test which was possible only in America. And so through the courtesy and generosity of the Government of Maharashtra, the B.P.C.C. (thanks to my old friend Rajni Patel) and the Kashmir Government (Shaikh Abdullah), I journeyed all the way to New York and submitted myself to the E.M.I. test at Montefiore Hospital and an Angiogramme test (which is a kind of operation) at Denbury Hospital, and then was declared immune from any further stroke. All this time, I could not read or write—and still cannot—except for an hour or two after putting in an eye lotion. Mercifully enough, I *could* see pictures and plays.

Much of the later part of the book had to be dictated while lying in bed, and the checking of facts and dates and quotations

was done by my loyal and efficient Secretary, Syed Abdul Rehman, who took the dictation, then typed and retyped the manuscript.

My thanks are due to Syed Abdul Rehman, and to my various friends, specially N.G. Jog, Inder Raj Anand and V.P. Sathe, who all read through the first draft and suggested many additions and deletions.

Since my return from New York, I have lived constantly under the shadow of death. Not that I feel like dying. But everyone thought I was dying or, at least, was incapacitated, and is now surprised at my insistence on being alive. I still walk on the beach and the glare of the early morning sun blinds my cataract-ridden eyes, making identification of friends impossible till they come very near. But, to the point of writing this Preface, I am still alive and looking forward to the cataract operation which may take some months more. The cataract removal will enable me to see clearly. My friend Inder Raj Anand has beaten me to the operation table and has had both his eyes operated.

I still feel alive and involved in mankind. I still admire a beautiful face—though I can only see it when it comes within kissable range. I still feel enthusiastic about certain causes—freedom, socialism and peace, among them. I am *alive*. But I am prepared for death which may come today or (hopefully) after 20 years! I hope it will come (whenever it comes) when I will be still writing “The Last Page” for my friend Russy Karanjia of *Blitz*. In fact, the “Last Last Page,” I hope, shall be published as a posthumous document. Indeed, if there is life after death (about which I am still subject to scepticism) I will be glad to send despatches from the other world.

KHWAJA AHMAD ABBAS

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1. Testament of a Man without a Birth Certificate

7 June 1975.

Today I am sixty-one years old. At least that is what the calendar says, and that is what my passport endorses. That is what my birth certificate would proclaim if I *had* a birth certificate. Unfortunately it was lost, burnt or destroyed, along with many other things and memories associated with my birth, in the communal riots of 1947 which compelled the thirty thousand Muslims of Panipat to migrate to a new, and then completely unknown, country called Pakistan.

The only exception was my family which chose to remain in India and, since the local police would not let them stay in Panipat, insisted on being repatriated to Bombay where I was frantically waiting for them. Thanks to the compassion and humanity of a man named Jawaharlal Nehru who sent a truck with an armed escort to bring them to Delhi, the lives and honour of my mother and sisters were saved, but as they had to leave at five minutes notice and at the dead of night, the entire household was left behind.

We were never rich and so, in terms of money, what we lost would not amount to much. Trunks full of old clothes—but these included the red bridal dress that my mother had worn on her marriage day. Piles of beddings, mattresses and pillows and bed-sheets—for we always had many guests in our house. A whole room full of books—the fat, leather-bound law books of my great uncle who was a lawyer, legislator and journalist; the whole library of religious literature belonging to my other uncle who was a scholar of Arabic and Persian and an authority on Islamic history and theology; bound volumes of Maulana Azad's long-defunct but ever-cherished journal *Al Hilal* which my father had carefully preserved; my own textbooks from school and college for I never liked to part with them, and quantities of revolutionary literature about Ireland and Italy

and Russia which I had avidly devoured while in college. A whole shelf full of silver cups and gold medals won not on the sportsfield but in wordy duels on the debating society platform. The framed Bachelor of Arts degree from Aligarh University. And, in a trunk full of ancient family records including a yellowing parchment scroll which traced our family tree literally all the way back to Adam and Eve, my father had carefully preserved the birth certificates of all his children.

Since his death, no one had bothered to open this Pandora's box but I knew that, if and when I needed it, my birth certificate, like hope, lay at the bottom of it.

But when I was able to go back to Panipat to salvage something out of the wreckage of our home, I found little of value within the decaying old walls, except half a dozen family photographs and college groups (one of them showed me dressed up as a little Cossack in the cast of Shaw's *Queen Christina*), and the heavy metal stump of a ceiling fan without the three blades. All else was gone, looted if it was useful, burnt if it was useless like piles of books and papers!

And yet I wandered all over the house, looking for nothing in particular, perhaps only looking for the ghosts of my memories. Here was the wide verandah-like *da-laan* in the *zenana* where, behind cottonpadded curtains which were drawn for privacy even in midsummer, I was born about the hour of midnight. There, in the room on the roof, I had had my first Quran lessons. Here used to be a table on which I and my sisters did our homework, and when we were playing under it, the same table was converted into a train compartment, or a queen's palanquin, or a robbers' cave where Ali Baba pronounced the magic words "Open Sesame." I even descended into the *teh-khana*, the dark, cool and musty cellar where we would sleep during the long summer days, and in the semi-darkness of the underground room, time seemed to stand still. But then the man from the office of the custodian of evacuee property (who simply could not understand why I strongly objected to being described, even by implication, as an evacuee) grew restless and suspicious and asked me what I was looking for in that *teh-khana*. I should have been poetic and replied with a dramatic and emotion-charged sigh, "I am looking for my lost childhood, for the days of my youth that, alas, will never come

back." But being prosaic, I simply replied, "Perhaps I was looking for my birth certificate."

As a matter of fact, at that time I very much needed the birth certificate to apply for my passport. This passport I would eventually get (after the necessary affidavits were duly sworn) and soon after I would have it confiscated by the orders of Mr Morarji Desai (then Home Minister of Bombay), and then have it restored to me on the intervention of—you guessed it—Jawaharlal Nehru. But then I am anticipating events by many, many years for, so far as this narrative is concerned, in the absence of the birth certificate, legally and properly, I am not born yet.

If I had that birth certificate now, I am sure it would have a very salutary and sobering and even shattering effect on me by confronting me with incontrovertible evidence that I *am* sixty-one years old. For, in absolute confidence, I must confess that I do not at all relish the idea of being reminded that I am sixty-one years old. That is why I dislike and disapprove of the idea of celebrating birthdays and, in particular, *my* birthdays.

Birthdays may be all right for the very young who like to feel that, year by year, they are growing older—if not better! But when one is past thirty, and certainly when one is past forty, each birthday is a cruel reminder that one is approaching the final countdown of one's life.

A birthday is like the end of the financial year which brings you the dreaded registered letter from the income tax department. You can ignore that letter for some time but you cannot escape it. Sooner or later you *have* to prepare and file your income tax returns. On every birthday you also have to make a balance sheet of your life and submit it to the judgment of your God or your conscience.

The debit side is easy to calculate—sixty-one years! That is the investment that one has made. But what have we to show on the credit side? A pile of writing buried in the yellowing files of newspapers—read today and forgotten tomorrow. Three dozen books which one has written—but how many of them will be remembered after twenty years? Aren't most of them already consigned by the critics to the limbo of the waste paper basket

of literature? A dozen forgotten films gathering dust in distributors' godowns—that graveyard of celluloid where even the biggest “hits” and the most famous film masterpieces must “rest in peace” after being briefly flashed on the silver screens. What other assets have I got to declare?

But then must one have assets? Life, after all, is not governed by the values and traditions of the capitalist system that one simply must have achievements, like profits, to declare. Isn't life itself the final meaning and purpose of life? Isn't it enough that one has lived, lived for sixty-one years, lived fully, experienced the richest emotions, witnessed the exciting events of one's times, participated, to whatever humble extent, in the great drama of human existence?

As a witness of the historic developments of our country and our world, I have been singularly lucky. I have talked to Mahatma Gandhi as he sat in a seaside hut in Juhu, plying the *charkha*; I have had many occasions to listen to Jawaharlal Nehru, to talk to him, to watch him working, relaxing, cantering round Simla on a horse, feeding his pandas, addressing meetings of hundreds of thousands, getting angry, losing his temper, and feeding a sickly, poor cartoonist who, a few minutes earlier, had provoked the famous Nehru temper by asking for a sitting at ten o'clock at night, because that was his only chance of earning three rupees! I have had the pleasure of listening to Sarojini Naidu reciting her poetry, and the rare experience of taking fragrant jasmine tea with Maulana Azad at 5 a.m.—the only time he could spare for an interview.

I have gone round the world, and made a dozen trips to the Soviet Union, personally witnessing and experiencing the thaw and spring of the post-Stalin era. I have made Nikita Khrushchev laugh with my wrong Russian, and I have talked to Gagarin immediately after his history-making flight in space.

I have listened to the music of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Onkarnath Thakur and Subbalakshmi, heard Josh and Nirala and Sumitranandan Pant and Evtushenko and Faiz reciting their poetry, seen the incomparable Ulanova playing Juliet on the Bolshoi Theatre stage, seen the paintings of De Vinci and Rembrandt and Raphael and Picasso in the Louvre in Paris and the Hermitage in Leningrad. I have seen beauty in repose and beauty in action, beauty of nature and beauty of man and

beauty created by man, beauty hallowed by the age and beauty of the contemporaneous world.

I have seen the Taj and Ajanta as also the Acropolis and the Parthenon, I have trekked up to the flower-strewn meadow of Khillanmarg in Kashmir, and taken a lift to the top of the Empire State Building to look at the utterly fantastic panorama of New York by night.

I have seen the serene face of the Buddha at Sarnath and the sad smile of the Mona Lisa, I have suffered with Christ and laughed at Charlie Chaplin's sadly comic tramp. Together with other fellow students I have cried with anguish when the news came that Bhagat Singh had been hanged, and I cried with joy as I danced, with a hundred thousand others, on the streets of Bombay on the day of freedom—15 August 1947.

All this I have witnessed, observed, experienced, felt, all this is within me, a part of me, and I am a part of all that I have observed, experienced, felt! The world has made me and I have made the world (at least two thousand millionth part of it), I am involved in humanity even as humanity is involved in me, as the seed is born of the tree, and the tree is the offspring of the seed.

Am I really sixty-one years old? I suppose I am. But I don't really *feel* it. When I look into the shaving mirror, a man with a greying fringe round the bald pate glares at me with his tired eyes. I refuse to recognize the stranger even if his face looks vaguely familiar. This *could not* possibly be me!

I am not claiming the quality of eternal youth, such as Jawaharlal Nehru possessed. I met him for the last time one month and three days before his death at the age of seventy-five, and he did not look more than sixty. When he smiled he looked even younger. As for me, *I look* sixty-one—perhaps even more. But the trouble is I don't *feel* like it.

I remember my father at the age of fifty. With his venerable salt-and-pepper beard he was already recognized as the Grand Old Man of our town who was looked up to for wise counsel and sage advice. The children of our locality all called him "Grandfather." If any of *my* grandnephews or grandnieces calls *me* "Grandfather," I am instinctively shocked. I bribe them with sweets and icecream to call me just "Uncle," though I

would prefer if they treated me as an elder brother.

I don't know if it is something to be proud of, or to be ashamed of, but I am some kind of Peter Pan, the Boy Who Refused To Grow Up. I have reached sixty-one without acquiring the wisdom, the dignity, the sobriety, the mature judgment, the judicious expression or the conservative taste that generally go with this age.

As a film critic, in ten years, I saw some three thousand movies. Since then I have written, directed or produced a dozen good, bad and indifferent films. I am the founder and president of a film society that shows the world's great screen classics. Still my idea of an enjoyable evening is to select the most stupid movie in town, and go there with a group of young friends, put our legs up on the balcony railing, noisily munch cashew nuts and popcorn, shout near-obscurities and applaud in all the wrong places in mock imitation of the uninhibited front-benchers.

Other symptoms of retarded mental growth? I am still liable to a quickened heartbeat when I see a beautiful face. I still like to jump into running trains and buses. When boarding a plane without reserved seats I run ahead to capture the coveted front seat where no one can lean back over me. In more than a quarter century of my career as a journalist and a writer, during which I must have published at least six million words under my byline, I have not got over the thrill of seeing my name in print. Every Thursday morning the plop of the newspapers awakens me and I rush out to pick up the copy of *Blitz* to make sure my "Last Page" has really appeared in print. I am still the biggest bulk buyer of copies of my own books and of tickets of my own films! It was so when my first short story was published in 1935, when my first book came out in 1938, when my first film was premiered in 1941, and the feeling is just the same today!

This sort of aberration, I suppose, is harmless enough. I have learnt to live with it as I have learnt to accept my short stature. Others are often amused, sometimes confused and only rarely disgusted, with my failure to project the dignity and sophistication appropriate to my age. I have never got myself psychoanalyzed, but an over-educated female once accused me of suffering from "a kind of emotional infantile paralysis"

which had atrophied my mental reflexes. Without knowing it, she may have been right. At the age of nineteen I did experience an emotional shock which did many things to me—it sharpened my perception of happiness and sorrow, it made me revolt against conventional values and codes of morality, it challenged my imagination, and it aroused all my latent powers of self-expression. It made me a sceptic, an agnostic, a socialist. It made me a writer, a restless traveller to the ends of the earth, an ally of all causes that were devoted to the building of new values in a new society. But, inside me, that last moment of emotion congealed, it did not die, it became *fixed* like a moving picture frame that suddenly freezes. The feelings, the emotional responses of a nineteen-year old remained just that, though the years passed, leaving their cruel marks on the face and the body. Only the heart refused to grow. You might call it inertia, paralysis, death, but it is also life, faith, loyalty, even some sort of eternity.

That is, perhaps, the truth. But like some other truths, it may not be the whole truth. Possibly there are also other reasons why, at sixty-one, I do not have the dignified bearing of my father at that age.

For one, why should I pretend to be unique? Isn't the whole world growing younger? It's not emotional paralysis that has done the trick but antibiotics and insecticides. As simple as that. Fifty years ago, the average age of an Indian was twenty-six years—and no wonder a man after fifty regarded himself as a Methuselah living on borrowed time, with one foot in the grave. Today that average has more than doubled, and within the last fifteen years at least three distinguished living Indians celebrated their centenary. The age of retirement may still be fifty-eight in government service, but we have any number of people above seventy who are active in politics, business, in literature and in the arts. In a world full of active septuagenarians, a man of sixty or even sixty-one need no longer feel that he is in his dotage.

The profession or, rather, professions I adopted have also something to do with my failure to grow up (or should one say success in continuing to feel young).

Teachers and professors now *have* to grow old—if they

didn't, their students wouldn't take them seriously. A youthful looking politician would be handicapped. Jawaharlal Nehru was the one exception that proved the rule! Age lends distinction and authority to a scholar, a preacher, a lawyer and, of course, to a "leader" which is also a regular profession in our country. Even the young ones in these professions have to assume the venerable posture of experience and wisdom. It is their stock in trade.

Engineers and scientists, on the other hand, are characteristically youthful—maybe because they are dealing with dynamic realities, because they are involved in the future! A forty-year old philosopher is "older" than a fifty-year old poet because while the philosopher is cultivating wisdom, which is the monopoly of age, the poet is sharpening his imagination, which is the prerogative of youth. Soldiers, airmen, cosmonauts, mountain climbers—these are youthful professions. So is journalism, the profession I chose in opposition to the wishes of my father who wanted me to be either a doctor or an engineer or, at least, a lawyer.

Journalism, too (whatever else may be said for or against it) is a young man's profession. Maybe because a journalist is always at the centre of all the dynamic things happening in the world which come in the category of NEWS! Or, maybe, it is the atmosphere of nervous excitement in which the journalist works, the fast tempo at which he must perennially race with time, the sharp edge of eternal curiosity, or the crusading spirit which inspires the journalist not only to report but to expose and attack, which give this profession its restless, youthful dynamism. A journalist has no time to grow old. Every time I meet my first editor and guru, J.N. Sahni, I marvel at his bouncing youthful energy, the quickness and sharpness of his mind, and his irrepressibly iconoclastic sallies against the powers-that-be. I once asked him the secret of his eternal youth and he replied, "The same as yours—journalism!"

My sorties into the sanctified field of literature and even into the rarefied realm of the cinema have been described, and dismissed, as only the projections of my journalism. Literary critics and film critics jot down the word "journalese" (which one of them once spelt as "journalese" obviously to rhyme with cheese!) even before they have had time to read my book or

see my film. The term "journalist" was almost a term of abuse among the arty-crafties and snobosseurs of the cinema till a group of young French newspapermen crashed into the movies and set (at least the Left Bank of) the Seine on fire with their "new wave" films.

Personally, I have never much cared for the subtle distinction between journalism and literature, or between journalistic cinema and artistic cinema. Realism in painting was once ridiculed as "colour photography," and realism in literature (and even in films) was dismissed as "journalism." But good, imaginative, inspired journalism has always been indistinguishable from realistic, purposeful, contemporary literature. There was a special correspondent called Karl Marx whose despatches to the *New York Herald Tribune* are now a part of the scriptures of communism. Both Hemingway and Steinbeck created their masterpieces of fiction out of their journalistic assignments and missions—Steinbeck wrote his *Grapes of Wrath* as he scoured the United States to investigate the causes of the great depression, Hemingway wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as he covered (and fought in) the Spanish civil war.

Even cinema, in its origin or even in the most significant stages of its subsequent development, has not been uninfluenced by journalism. The earliest films, being newsreels, were nothing but celluloid journalism, news reports flashed on the silver screen. The first significant silent film made in India was a newsreel cum documentary about the nationalist agitation against the partition of Bengal. The great prophet of artistic cinema by whom all cineastes swear was not an ivory tower abstractionist but a journalist, pamphleteer and a painter of political posters named Sergei Eisenstein who revolutionized the world of cinema by his *Battleship Potemkin*. In Italy, Michelangelo Antonioni wrote short stories, newspaper articles and film criticism before he took to directing films. In France there is a whole group of young journalists and critics making (or remaking) cinema history. Francois Trauffat and Jean-Luc Godard were both critics and editors who were relentlessly attacking the conventional cinema before they had a chance to make their own films.

The cinema and journalism have many things in common—concern with life, which is the subject-matter of both, the

challenge of communicating one's ideas to a mass audience (and making them pay for it!), and an unconventional, if you like Bohemian, way of life which is not the way of life of a clerk, an army officer, a shoe-maker, or manufacturer of jute or textiles. They also have in common the excitement of communication and creation, financial insecurity and professional uncertainty, the tension and the thrill of living from moment to moment. It is that, perhaps, which keeps them young—the fifty-two-year old hero acting out love scenes with a young actress less than half his age is as characteristic of cinema as the sixty-year old special correspondent casually hopping on to a trans-continental aeroplane to report a war, a revolution, an earth-quake or just a summit conference.

There is no age of retirement with pension for a journalist, a writer, a film actor, director or producer. There is only one little difference. The actor (or actress) must never look at his (or her) birth certificate. The journalist never has need—or time—to look at his.

2. Rotten Fruit on a Family Tree

There has been only one psychic experience in my life. It has not converted me to spiritualism, but certainly created in me a healthy scepticism—even about scepticism!

In 1938 when, at the age of twenty-four, I undertook a round-the-world journey, I returned to India by the Orient Express, proceeding from Paris via Munich, Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest—and arriving at the end of Europe on the coast of the Bosphorus in Istanbul or Constantinople.

Compared to Istanbul, other cities like Geneva, Zurich, Paris, Rome and Munich are geometrically constructed. But Constantinople, which was built and re-built by the Byzantines, the Christians and the Muslims, is one of the most complicated jigsaw puzzles. After three days in Istanbul I made the eerie discovery that not once had I asked the way of any one—Turk or tourist—nor had I consulted a guide, a city map or a traveller's handbook. In retrospect, it seemed an uncanny experience. It was as if I had been there before. Was it some improbable case of awakened memory of a previous incarnation?

According to the hand-written journal of my father, who had performed the Haj and visited both Mecca and the other holy cities of Arabia, there is a little house in Medina on which there is tablet engraved in Arabic—*Bait Abu Ayub Ansari*. Legend has it that when the Prophet Mohamed migrated, under duress, from Mecca (*Hegira*) and came to Medina where he had many converts to the Islamic faith, every Medinite was anxious that he should stay with him. The Prophet, to avoid creating a dissension by any show of personal preference, left it to his mount to choose where to stop. "I will stay wherever the camel chooses to squat," he declared. And the camel stopped in front of the house of a young man called Abu Ayub (*Ansari*, which means Helper, was a name adopted by all the

devotees of the Prophet in Medina). That was our earliest ancestor, who is historically traceable, known as one of the *Sahaba* (Friends) of the Prophet.

Many years after the death of Mohamed, when the Caliph Muawiyah began the aggressive phase of the Islamic empire, and sent his armies to conquer the Byzantine territories, he wanted one of the surviving *Sahaba* to lead the army to rouse the devotion of the soldiers. Abu Ayub Ansari was the sole surviving individual among the *Sahaba*, and so he was chosen to go in front of the army. But he had by then reached extreme old age, could hardly walk, and so he was symbolically carried in a palanquin at the head of the conquering army.

"Even if I die on the way," Abu Ayub told the army commanders, "let my bier be carried in front of the army. If you can't go forward any longer, bury me there before retracing your steps," he willed. After a few days the old man died—but a dead man continued to lead the army of the Omayyeds which ultimately reached the walls of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. Failing to conquer it at that time, the army retreated, but left the body of the venerable friend of the Prophet buried in a grave there. When the Islamic armies did conquer Constantinople, the first thing they did was to build a mausoleum over that grave. (And that is where my unknowing feet had taken me in 1938!)

The tradition of migration is old among the early Muslim communities. Evidently, for political reasons, our ancestors moved from Medina and eventually their descendants found themselves domiciled in Herat in northern Afghanistan near the border of Soviet Turkmenistan.

The ancestor who migrated to India in the reign of Sultan Ghyasuddin Balban was Khwaja Malik Ali—Khwaja being a hereditary title that was bestowed on his family in Afghanistan. Malik Ali, being a Persian and Arabic scholar, was received with honour by the Sultan and was appointed Qazi of Panipat, and given a big *jagir* which comprised almost one fourth of the land around Panipat. Panipat, fifty miles from Delhi, is supposed to have been one of the towns for which the pre-historic great battle of Mahabharata was fought, only a few miles away at Kurukshetra. Malik Ali's descendants lost the lands in the violent confusion of the later age when the

Mughals, the Marathas, and eventually the British were contending for supremacy of northern India. My great-great-grandfather Khwaja Akbar Ali, at the age of sixteen, was involved in a blood-feud and killed someone in retaliation for the murder of his father and uncles. He was arrested but managed to escape from jail, and made his way to Lucknow where he lived for thirty years. By the time he returned, the British were the virtual overlords of Delhi and the surrounding area, and he had lost all his lands which were confiscated by the British and sold to a French adventurer called Alexander Skinner. Eventually Akbar Ali was able to redeem some of the land which was nearer to the town.

Khwaja Akbar Ali was reputed to be a very brave and strong man whose gallantry and chivalry were almost legendary. One of his sons Khwaja Azhar Ali was my father's grandfather on the paternal side. Though nominally educated, he rose to be *tehsildar*—a revenue official.

My father's maternal grandfather, Mir Ashraf Hussain, was an even more colourful character. He had left home as a boy, determined to seek a career as a soldier. Eventually he joined the Holkar's army and rose to be a commander, known for his courage and his mastery of military strategy. Defeated in battle, the Holkar made peace with the British, and his commanders were pensioned off, being given large *jagirs* by the victorious *firangees*—the only exception being Mir Ashraf Husain. My father records in his journal, "Thank God, our family was spared having to eat the Britisher's salt!"

There is an interesting and romantic story told about the triumphant return of Mir Ashraf Husain to Panipat. A pretty girl was being carried in a palanquin when the Mir Saheb, with his mounted military retinue, was entering the town. The fair maiden imagined the mounted brigade to be freebooters or part of an invading army, and fainted out of fear and shock. Unlike the romantic melodramas of the screen, the middle-aged but handsome military commander, who was still a bachelor, and the beautiful girl in the palanquin never set eyes on each other, but, just by sheer chance, they were destined to be married.

In those days the military adventurers made big fortunes, and Commander Ashraf Husain of the Holkar's army was no

exception. A family legend records that he had brought back so many pearls that big earthenware jars were full of them! My father used to recall that he had seen some of these pearls with his mother and that among the family heirlooms was a Maratha turban of exquisitely fine cotton which was fifty or sixty yards long, a sword with a golden handle, and a shield made of rhinoceros's skin!

Commander Ashraf Husain's son, Mir Mohamed Husain, born in his father's old age, was the next interesting character on our family tree. He was not tall and impressive like his father. He was thin and short of stature. But he had inherited the courage and military bearing of his father. He did not succeed in getting into an army—of the Mughals or the Marathas—but became a *dewan* or a junior police official in western Uttar Pradesh, and came to exercise his limited authority with a *shaan* that even a contemporary inspector of police or a deputy commissioner could not have the courage or the imagination to do. Once the poor people of the town and the peasants of the surrounding villages complained to him that the local grain merchant and moneylender was selling grain at exorbitant prices that they could not afford. Nor could they keep up with payments of his usurious rates of interest on loans against the security of their lands. The *dewan* called the sturdy *gujars* of that area and hinted to them that if they looted and burnt the house of that moneylender and profiteer, the police would look the other way.

One night the moneylender's house was sacked, all his ill-gotten money was looted, and his whole house with all the books of account was burnt down. The moneylender himself was killed and the dead body thrown into the burning house. The *dewan* of police merely recorded that there was an accidental fire in the moneylender's house and that he was burnt to death in the flames.

One another occasion, in another village during a famine, the starving peasants complained that while they were dying of hunger, the grain merchants were profiteering—a very contemporary phenomenon! But the reaction of the police *dewan* in the nineteenth century would be regarded today as too drastic, revolutionary and subversive. He ordered that wheat should be sold at sixteen seers to the rupee, otherwise the shops would

be allowed to be looted! The traders closed their shops in protest, and Mir Mohamed Husain instigated the starving peasants to loot them. When the grain dealers reported this to the sympathetic Sahebs, an explanation was demanded from the *dewan*. Mir Mohamed Husain said that he could not see the suffering of the starving peasants. "These traders have their granaries full, yet they have created artificial scarcities to raise their prices and make their profits." The explanation was not regarded as satisfactory to the British police officials, and Mir Saheb was first jailed and then forced to retire.

Mir Mohamed Husain seems to have been quite an extraordinary man. Despite his short stature, he had a military bearing, and his turban always sat on his head at a rakish angle. He was a good rider and once rode a horse all the way to Calcutta—it took him a whole month to cover the distance of nearly one thousand miles. At the same time he was a scholar of Arabic and Persian and hundreds of Muslims as well as Hindus studied Persian from him. Towards the end of his life, he developed a passion for *kimiya* or alchemy—and spent hours every day experimenting with different chemical compounds to turn base metal into gold.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, India was cut up into hundreds of little states and principalities. My father's journal recalls that in 1853 a caravan of pilgrims went from Panipat to Bombay, and from there by sailing ships to the holy places of Arabia and Iraq. This caravan of bullock carts took three months to reach Bombay and a year and a half to return from the pilgrimage. Travelling in those days was hazardous—one encountered marauding bands of thugs, *pindaris* and dacoits on the way. The feudal states and principalities were so numerous—and so small—that the coinage changed every few days. The coins of one state were not legal tenders in the next state. Several people died on the way—one old man fell into a well and was drowned, while the caravan doggedly went on its way.

From Bombay they took a sailing ship. The trip to Basra (which, on the reverse route from Basra to Karachi by steamer, was to take me only three days in 1938) was completed by my devout forbears in six weeks. In Iraq, which I traversed by air conditioned desert bus, this group of pilgrims to the shrines of

Hazrat Ali and Imam Husain travelled by a camel caravan which constantly harassed by the local free booters.

When the group of pilgrims, which included my father's grandfather and my grandfather, returned to Bombay a year later, they saw the strangest sight of their journey. The railway line from Bombay to Nasik was being laid and there were legends current about the new power that would pull the vehicles that would run on these rails. Some called it the mechanical camels, others said the Englishmen had tamed the legendary *rakshasas* who would drag it at incredible speed. Still others believed it was the *Djins* who, by their supernatural powers, would drive the trains—like the magic carpet in *The Arabian Nights*!

By the time he returned from the long pilgrimage, my grandfather, Khwaja Ghulam Abbas, was a mature young man ready for marriage which, in those days, had to be early. Now he had to seek a career. After a brief spell of teaching in a school in Bulandshahr (there was no school in Panipat) he became an overseer with the contractors who were making a survey and levelling the ground for the railway line in the Punjab. The greedy contractors exploited the ignorant villagers, underpaid them, overworked them and their camels, and foraged in the villages for chicken and eggs to offer to their white officers. The British engineers encouraged these practices and were susceptible to the flattery and the sycophancy of the employees. The only exception was the young man Ghulam Abbas who did his hard work honestly but with self-respect. Consequently so he could not last long in the service of the British engineers or the Indian contractors, and soon he returned to Panipat.

This was the eve of those revolutionary events that would convulse the country in 1857. Panipat, being only fifty miles from Delhi, the devout and deeply religious people of the town were often harangued by the *maulavies* who were then fanning out of Delhi to preach the *Jehad*—the holy war against the *firangees*.

Among the young men of Panipat who heard this message of revolution was Ghulam Abbas who, already, nursed strong anti-British feelings. But, while several hundred Panipat youths volunteered and secretly left to join the insurrectionary forces

in Delhi, the timidity of the purdah-observing women of his household, and in particular the affectionate concern of his mother for the safety of her beloved son, prevented Ghulam Abbas from enlisting in the revolutionary forces. (Decades later, the story would be repeated when the same timidity and affectionate black mail of my own mother was to prevent me from courting imprisonment in the Quit India struggle!)

So Ghulam Abbas (who had been married off in a hurry to the daughter of Mir Mohamed Husain to keep him "imprisoned" with love at home) watched the failure of the Great Revolt, and the vengeful persecution of the Indians, specially the Muslims, who had participated or even sympathized with the revolutionaries. Hundreds of them fled Delhi and took refuge in the intricate lanes and by-lanes of Panipat to escape the wrath of the punitive military expeditions of the British sent out to hunt them out. Spies and informers were sent to ferret them out and one of those—Ghulam Mohamed alias Gami—was particularly notorious. He was sent by the British to Panipat, and came to be cordially hated by Ghulam Abbas who was helping the Delhiwalas to hide in safety, escaping from one inter-linked house to the other in the locality inhabited by the *Ansar* clan, as the hated Gami desperately hunted for them. It is said that, mainly due to the vigilance and energy of Ghulam Abbas, the police informer failed to arrest even one revolutionary hiding in Panipat.

The informer, exasperated by the grim hide and seek of the revolutionaries, arrested the defiant Ghulam Abbas and took him to the British general who was camping outside the town. He told him that this young man was responsible for their failure to apprehend the hidden rebels. At that time people were blown from the mouth of a cannon for mere suspicion of being rebels and revolutionaries, and Ghulam Abbas was full of youthful defiance and hatred of the British which he could hardly hide or suppress. But the elders of the town—Muslims and Hindus—gathered together and went to the general in a deputation to plead for the young man's life. Being a diplomat, the general did not want to turn the whole town anti-British and eventually released Ghulam Abbas with a severe warning. The same night the rebellious young man was packed off in a camel cart to Lahore, to live with his mother's brother who was

an office assistant of the lieutenant governor of the Punjab.

Among both the Hindus and the Muslims, religion was the mainspring of their hatred of the alien rulers. They had little understanding of the political aspects of patriotism. In the case of Ghulam Abbas, the impact of the events of 1857 was to turn him into a deeply religious person whose hatred of the cruel foreigners (who had almost killed him!) took the form of his antipathy for English education. He equated it with the hated culture and the way of life of the alien infidels which they wanted to impose upon the Indians. He was determined to save his first-born son from the contagion of English education and decided to give him education in Arabic and Persian and to make him a *maulavi*.

But there was someone else in Panipat of greater sensitivity and deeper and more pragmatic perception, upon whom the tragedy of 1857 had the opposite impact. This was Khwaja Altaf Husain, the poet who wrote verses under the pen-name of *Hali* (or Modern) who was the protagonist of English education for Indian Muslims. While retaining the essence of their religion, they could discard the old superstitions and the lethargic feudal ways, and cooperate and compete with the other communities in developing a modern attitude in keeping with the demands of the present age. He was the maternal uncle of my grandmother. And it was on her insistence that my eldest uncle was sent to study in Delhi where Altaf Husain was teaching Persian and Urdu literature in the Anglo-Arabic College. The three sons of my grandfather were: Ghulam-ul-Hasanain (who received high education in Arabic and Theology and basic elementary education in English), Ghulam-ul-Saqlain who graduated from M.A.O. College and started legal practice, edited a magazine called *Asr-e-Jadeed* (The Modern Age), and Ghulam-us-Sibtain, my father, who graduated from Aligarh and, in turn, became a teacher, the tutor of a prince, a businessman who modernized the preparation and packaging of Unani medicines.

Hali became one of the leading intellectuals and poets who broke with the formalism of the classical Urdu poetry, and the conventional imagery of the rose and the nightingale. His verses had a strong sociological content. He made a great contribution to the Islamic renaissance by writing the epic *Musaddas-e-Hali* or *Madd o Jazre-e-Islam* (Rise and Fall of Islam) which traced

the decline of Muslims when they took to effete and decadent ways. He was a friend of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and helped him to found the Anglo-Oriental College which later became the Aligarh Muslim University. Though his concern was mainly with Muslims, he wanted them to develop educationally and intellectually into an enlightened people, able to share the responsibilities of democratic politics within the mainstream of national politics. *Hubb-e-Watan* (Love of the Motherland), significantly, is one of his most stirring verses.

His son, Sajjad Husain, was among the first four graduates from the Anglo-Oriental College which was then affiliated to the Calcutta University. Travelling most of the way by the slow trains that had recently started (the gaps had to be traversed by horse-driven tongas or bullock carts) it took them more than a week to reach the city on the banks of the Hoogly.

When the results came out and Sajjad Husain, along with three other Aligarians, was declared to have graduated, all the four were called by the governor of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. The Englishman patronizingly asked each of them what job he would prefer. One opted for the civil service and was sent to England, the other for the judiciary and became a sessions judge, the third asked for a police post and became a superintendent of police.

"Well, Sajjad Husain," the governor asked when his turn came, "What department do you want to join?"

"Education," replied the son of *Hali*.

"Are you a slow-witted fool?" His Excellency asked him, and added, "You have chosen the worst and the poorest paid of all the services—why?"

"Your Excellency, education is what my people need most," replied Sajjad Husain.

He came to be the inspector general of schools in the Frontier province.

The dapper and well-dressed intellectual, Khwaja Sajjad Husain, was the complete contrast to Khwaja Ghulam Abbas who, dressed in home-spun home-woven *kurta pajama*, looked like a peasant. And, indeed, in later life he was a farmer, ploughing and harvesting his own lands to set an example to the so-called Muslim landlords of Panipat who regarded agricultural labour as below their dignity.

Ghulam Abbas was, from all accounts, a remarkable personality. Strong like an ox, once (like Jean Valjean of *Les Misérables*) he lifted a heavily loaded cart stuck in the mud on his shoulders, put the wheels on the dry road—and then fainted! Yet he was compassionate and kind. He was so hospitable that, like Abu Hasan of *The Arabian Nights*, he would make a round of the mosques every evening to find out if any hungry traveller was staying there. (The mosques and temples were the hotels and dak bungalows of those days).

My father used to tell us that he never had occasion to see and use a coin till he went to college in Aligarh. There was no money in the rambling house where my father grew up with his two brothers and three sisters—but plenty of foodgrains, vegetables, milk, butter and *ghee*. There were several buffaloes and every night their milk would be set to boil in an enormous shallow cauldron made of iron. When the children get up at cock's crow to offer their prayers and prepare to go to school, they would find a layer of *malai* (thick cream) on top of the milk, and they would cut a slice of it, put it on a loaf of overnight bread, and eat it with relish. Grandfather had no money for the college education of his sons. But once he had capitulated to *Hali*, he never stinted for college fees. Every term as Ghulam-us-Saqlain or Ghulam-us-Sibtain prepared to leave for Aligarh, he would mortgage one of his lands to some moneylender and give the amount for the full term to his son or sons to receive the same English education the value of which he still acknowledged but with reservations.

But he did not require any special inducement to accept the need for social reform among Muslims. In our town, the minor landed aristocrats, who were mostly Muslim, looked down upon the trader class. The result was that there were no shops owned or run by Muslims. To my grandfather that was a challenge to be accepted, just as he had accepted the challenge of agriculture. At a time when no one had heard of "cooperation" as the basis of commerce, Ghulam Abbas started a cooperatively-owned cloth store. But his friends who had subscribed the funds were too embarrassed to run the shop, lest they be dubbed as "shop-keeper." So my grandfather volunteered to be the first to do so. He ran the shop and kept the accounts, but had to give up after three months for he could not afford it! All his friends and

acquaintances bought their requirements of cloth on credit—and then “forgot” to pay.

Sajjad Husain, the sophisticated educationist and intellectual, and Ghulam Abbas, farmer and trader, were not only friends but were closely related, being some kind of cousins. Uncle Saqlain had already married the granddaughter of Maulana Hali by his elder son Akhlaq Husain. When it was time for Ghulam-us-Sibtain to be married, it was suggested that he should also marry one of the granddaughters of Hali by his other son, Sajjad Husain.

And so by the union of Ghulam-us-Sibtain, the twenty-eight-year old son of peasant-proprietor Khwaja Ghulam Abbas, and Masroora Khatoon, the daughter of the dapper intellectual Khwaja Sajjad Husain, the stage was set for the eventual birth of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas!

All my life I have been an upholder of social environment, and an opponent of heredity, as the decisive factor in determining the character and destiny of man—or woman. But, after reading the family chronicle in my father’s handwritten journal, and the latest researches of Dr Khorana and other “genetic engineers” into the strange alchemy of genes, I find myself wondering whether something more than physical assets does not pass from the parents to their children. I am short-statured and shortsighted because my father was so, but I haven’t got his sturdy physique. I have a weak chest, my lungs are liable to be congested, with frequent bouts of colds, flu and bronchitis and at least one attack of pneumonia. Possibly, I have inherited all these ailments from my asthmatic mother. But this rotten fruit called Khwaja Ahmad Abbas has dropped from a unique family tree of saints and sinners, murderers and marauders, timid.recluses and adventures, soldiers of fortune and defenders of faith, poets and farmers. What kind of genes have been transmitted to me by my assorted ancestors? Does my flair for travel come from my maternal great-grandfather, Commander Ashraf Husain, who rode to Calcutta on a horse in thirty days? Does my rebellious and non-conformist spirit come from my grandfather who was almost blown from the mouth of a cannon in 1857? And, going farther back, is my furious passion for social justice another form of the rage that drove one of my ancestors

to kill rather than suffer the ignominy of bending the knee before tyrants?

We shall see, and seek, answers to these questions, as we go along.

For the present, I have just been born.

3. Abraham had a Son

Before I had learnt to live, I almost died—at the age of less than a year. And thereby hangs a tale. . . .

Prophet Abraham is common to the mythology of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions.

It is said that God wanted to test the faith and devotion of Abraham so He commanded him to sacrifice what was dearest to him.

What was dearest to Abraham was his infant son Ismail—or Samuel—so he prepared to sacrifice him to demonstrate that he loved God much more than his son.

But God was merciful and at the last minute exchanged the child with a little lamb who was slaughtered.

It is to commemorate that sacrifice of Abraham that millions of lambs, goats, sheep, cows and camels are sacrificed every year on the day of *Baqr-Eid* throughout the Muslim world.

I have a great sympathy for little Ismail or Samuel. I know how he must have felt, for that is what almost happened to me when I was less than a year old babe-in-arms. My father was playing Abraham and I was the sacrificial lamb! This is how it happened.

One of the pet aversions of Khwaja Ghulam-us-Sibtain, my father and the son of Khwaja Ghulam Abbas, was the ostentation and expensive social ceremonies that accompanied all marriages in India, particularly in our family. For a few days' ostentatious display, whole properties would be mortgaged to finance the purchase of costly jewellery, glittering bridal costumes made of silks and brocades that would be worn only once or twice on special occasions, and thousands of rupees worth of utterly useless utensils and knick-knacks that constituted the dowery that the bride would take with her to her husband's house.

Then there would be illuminations for the marriage procession, a richly decorated horse for the bridegroom, a special palanquin for the bride, a bevy of *domnies* or songstresses to sing marriage songs, occasionally a dancing girl or two to provide entertainment to the guests. And, of course, hundreds of guests would be invited, fed and feasted.

Only the very affluent could afford all this expensive ostentation. But while competing with the rich, an average middle class family would be financially ruined in a daughter's wedding.

The social reformers—and, among them, my grandfather—had been very active in denouncing this “un-Islamic” ceremonial of marriage. The Prophet had enjoined upon his followers to observe simplicity and austerity in all ceremonial connected with a marriage and not to incur debts to solemnize a wedding which was, indeed, a solemn social contract between a man and a woman.

But social convention had won over religious considerations, and no one had succeeded in stemming the tide of extravagance. So, when the time came for the marriage of his orphaned niece (her father, Ghulam-us-Saqlain, had unfortunately died at a tragically young age, leaving his younger brother to look after his widow and children), my father decided to set an example of economy and austerity which, he hoped, would be followed by the whole community, at least in Panipat.

He delivered a lecture on the much-needed social reform to the women, specially to his own wife and his widowed sister-in-law. They casually promised to be economical and, I suppose, added “so far as possible.” But after a few days my father was dismayed to find the usual lavish preparations being made. Goldsmiths and jewellers called to sell their wares to the ladies behind the latticed windows, the cloth dealers came with their bolts of silks and brocades. Drums were being beaten and the sounds of *shehnai* music filled the air. All this was a challenge to the conscience of the young social reformer.

I was then only a few months old and spent my time sleeping or crying or sucking my thumb, as I lay in my cradle. With all the excitement of the marriage preparations in the *zenana* or the womens' quarter, my mother had no time to look after her son and, but for the two-hour feeds at her breast when I was

taken to her, my cradle was left in the room of her husband.

Provoked by my sullen countenance (I suppose) my father made a grim resolve. He lifted me from the cradle and quietly walked out of the house by a backdoor, leaving an already prepared letter in the cradle.

It was already dark as he walked through the streets. People who knew him accosted him and asked where he was carrying the little infant. "Taking him for a walk," he said and did not pause for a discussion or even a conversation.

We had an empty house near the railway station which once was a caravan *serai*, and was even then known as *serai-wala makaan*. He opened it, locked it from inside, and carried me to a cot on which he (I am sure) tenderly laid me to rest.

In the letter, he had written that he was carrying the child "somewhere," not specifying the abandoned house, and there he would starve himself—and starve the infant—unless he was assured that the women would give up their ostentatious extravagances and agree to a simple marriage. "I have no desire to participate in the marriage festivities, I have no desire even to live, if women of my own family are going to defy me, my principles and my God. And I have no desire to let my son live in such a rotten and unprincipled atmosphere!" That, I suppose, must have been the sum and substance of his letter.

Once or twice during the night, my mother did look in, found her husband and her son missing, but in all the gay goings-on, she never suspected anything sinister. She probably imagined that my father must have given the infant an artificial feed by filling the feeding bottle with milk diluted with water. She had no idea about the hunger strike on which the father (willingly and deliberately) and the son (unwillingly and by compulsion) were launched!

It was only in the morning hours that the letter was discovered and then panic swept over the wedding guests. The music was stilled and the wailing of my mother for her new born son filled the silent hours of the dawn. Servants were despatched to the houses of all the relations and friends of my father where he could have gone. It was almost noon when one of the servants met someone who told him that he had seen "Khwaja Ghulam-us-Sibtain going towards the railway station."

"*Serai-wala makaan!*" my mother instinctively cried out.

Sixty years ago, no carriages were available in Panipat so the contrite and panic-stricken women, enveloped in their voluminous *burgas*, started on foot and walked the mile and a half to the railway station road.

When they knocked on the *serai-wala makaan*, my father answered from inside, "Who's that?"

Relieved to hear her husband's voice, my mother asked how was her son.

My father, without opening the door, replied, "He is still alive!"

Relieved and yet nervous, the women cried and pleaded with my father to open the door. But he was adamant. He would not open it until they—my mother and my aunt—swore by the Holy Quran that there would be no extravagance and ostentation in the marriage. The weeping women promised, swore, pledged—and only then the bleary-eyed man opened the door. He had spent the whole night watching, by candle light, the sinking condition of his son with feelings that could be imagined.

My mother ran to the place where I lay, half dead, and took me to her breast. I must have stuck to that source of life-giving milk like a hungry limpet.

That was how social reform came to our family, and our town, by endangering the life of a few months old child—*me!* No one in our town had yet heard of satyagraha—Mahatma Gandhi was still in South Africa—but this must have been the first successful experiment in emotional blackmail for the cause of social reform. That I almost died in the process may be incidental and irrelevant to the historian, but it is very relevant to me. Some doctors, including the great Doctor Ansari, told my father later on that even if I had survived the "fast unto death," I would carry the unseen scars of the ordeal all my life. My congenital debility and lack of strength, and susceptibility to colds and coughs, are perhaps the result of that day when I had to go hungry for nearly eighteen hours!

I was born on 7 June 1914, around midnight of a full moon.

Years later, a devout inspector of schools was to ask me, "Who brought you into this world?"

He expected to hear, "Allah"—God! But I prosaically and pragmatically replied, "Mrs David." For that good old Christian lady (whom I would be taught to *salaam* with respect whenever I encountered her on the street wearing her ankle-length frock and a funny large hat on her grey head) was the local midwife who officiated at my debut on to the stage of this life.

But it must have been an inauspicious moment for the world, and for my family.

For, within two months, on 4 August 1914, occurred the murder of the Grand Duke of Austria which brought about the First World War that continued for more than four bloody years.

And at midnight on 31 December 1914, died my maternal great-grandfather, Maulana Altaf Husain Hali, poet, reformer and educationist, still the most illustrious member of our family, and even today regarded as the most distinguished citizen of our town.

The first sounds that still vaguely echo in my heart are the wailings of the women, mourning the death of Hali, a father figure for our family and our clan.

The next sounds that reverberate in my childhood memories are the military horses' hooves on the Grand Trunk Road that passed outside the town near the railway station. I was told later they were the cavalry horses of the officers returning from the villages after recruiting volunteers who had been cajoled or coerced or duped into joining the army of the empire to fight in the war, and to give their lives for fourteen rupees a month!

Still more clearly echoes a folk song in the Haryanvi dialect (though it would take some fifty-five years for the Haryana province to become a reality). The villagers would sing in chorus as they took the train from Panipat for Ambala Cantonment, which was a big army centre in the Punjab of those days:

*"Teray baahar khaday rangroot
Tai noo bharti ho lay nai!"*

(The recruits are standing outside [your hut]
You hurry up and join the army!)

I suppose a child can absorb sounds by the ear quicker than it can absorb sights by the eye. Deep down in my subconscious

are the sounds of the railway train for (not only on that fateful night of my near-death but on many other occasions) I was often brought to the *serai-wala makaan* which was just outside the compound of the railway station. Sounds of trains coming and trains going, goods trains shunting, solitary locomotives rumbling over the rails, the whistle blasts blown by the guards and the ubiquitous cries of the water-vendors—Hindu *paani*—Muslim *paani*! Hindu *paani*—Muslim *paani*! Hindu—Muslim! Muslim—Hindu ! This was the *mantra* of religious exclusiveness that went into the subconscious of millions of infants who were too small to focus their little eyes properly, or with any understanding, on the common water tap from where the Hindu water-carrier with a prominent tuft on his head filled his aluminium bucket, and the Muslim water-carrier with a beard filled his goatskin.

Who invented this distinction of Hindu *paani* and Muslim *paani*, I was to wonder much later. Who ordained that Indians shall be made conscious of their different religions each moment of their waking hours? Was it dictated by the untouchability of the Hindu caste system, or the touch-me-not-ism of the Muslims' superiority complex?

The Brahmin felt defiled if he happened to touch a Muslim or an untouchable Hindu, the Muslim felt contaminated if he happened to touch a Hindu. I remember an uncle of mine who returned from the pilgrimage to Mecca called *Haj*, and was brought in a procession from the railway station, many Muslim and even some Hindu friends embracing him on the way. When he came home, he refused to embrace his own children till he had had a cleansing dip in the stagnant pool of the mosque and changed into clean clothes!

Was it all invented by the foreign rulers? Or was it only encouraged by them for their own purposes? Many years later I was appalled when I read that an intellectual and patriot like Balgangadhar Tilak was forced to undergo a purification ceremony after taking tea and biscuits in a party where Muslims and Christians were also present. Among Hindus and Muslims, who is the pot and who is the kettle to call each other black—and unclean?

Hindu *paani*—Muslim *paani*!

Hindu school—Muslim school!

Hindu university—Muslim university!

Hindu temple (Muslim and *Malechhas* not admitted!)—
Muslim mosque (Hindus and *Kafirs* not allowed!)

Hindu *Mahasabha* (some would say Hindu Congress!)—
Muslim Conference, Muslim League!

Separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims.

Hindu-Muslim riots.

Har Har Mahadev—Allah-o-Akbar. (The last fatal words heard by thousands of Hindu and Muslim victims of the inter-communal riots).

Partition of the country.

Hindu-sthan—Pakistan!

Hindu *paani*—Muslim *paani*!

There is a grim kind of logic about this circular sequence. What was the cause and what was the effect? Who came first—the Muslim chicken or the Hindu egg? From an innocent child's subconscious to an adult's ever-questioning conscious, I was to see and observe, and wonder at, the inexorable tragedy being played out on the stage of my country's politics—and in the heart of every Indian, Hindu or Muslim, barring very few exceptions.

But to go back to the first visual impact of my childhood. . . .

4. Three Graves in Panipat

My childhood years in a primary school were dominated by three over-sized marble graves which were situated in the courtyard of our primary school. This was one of the four in different parts of the town that were affiliated to the Hali Muslim High School started in the memory of my great-grandfather in the year of his death—and my birth!

As schoolboys, we sat astride the graves, which were in the shape of long, high, smooth platforms, revolving our tops on their polished surfaces, or playing with the big berries which could also be revolved like tops, in the recess period.

I had already spent a year, sitting at the feet of a venerable *Hafizji*, as the old man was respectfully called for he was a *hafiz*, that is one who knew the whole of the Quran by heart. I couldn't recite all the verses in the holy book by rote, but before I was four years of age I had learnt to read the Arabic text of the Quran, without any understanding of what it meant except a vague idea that all the verses proclaimed the greatness of God and His Prophet.

Since the Arabic alphabet was substantially the same as the Urdu alphabet, when I went to the primary school, I was given admission straightaway in the second grade. That is how I could matriculate at the age of fifteen, graduate with a B.A. degree at the age of nineteen, and pass out of the Aligarh Muslims University with a LL.B. degree (at the compulsive behest of my father) at the age of twenty-one.

But to go back to the primary school, which was located in one of the mausoleums attached to the grand tomb of the thirteenth century Sufi saint Bu Ali Shah *Qalander*—which, literally, means “the demented one.” He lived during the reign of the Balban dynasty. He was a contemporary of my earliest ancestor, Khwaja Malik Ali, who had been appointed the *Qazi* of Panipat. The *Qazi* had temporal as well as spiritual autho-

rity—he was the local magistrate authorized to try both civil and criminal cases on behalf of the king, but he was also something like a cardinal who could deal with heretics (which, in modern Marxist phraseology, would be called deviationists). The first such case referred to him was a complaint that the so-called demented saint was really a heretic and had antagonized the local Muslims by uttering profanities about God.

The punishment for a Muslim who deviated from the path laid down by the Islamic *Shariat* was to be beheaded—even as, several hundred years later, another Sufi saint in Delhi, Sarmad (who went stark naked), was beheaded at the orders of Emperor Aurangzeb for his persistence in proclaiming only half of the *kalmah*, i.e., “*La Ilaha*” (There is no God) and omitting the latter portion, “*‘Il la’allah!*” (except the one God!) which completes the full texts of the basic formula of Islamic faith.

Qazi Khwaja Malik Ali, however, found the alleged profanities uttered by the saint in his moments of *jazzb*, or spiritual ecstasy, were really the harmless endearments of a Sufi who passionately loved God as his beloved one. So the saint was honourably exonerated, the case against him was dismissed, and in his rare moments of “sanity” and coherence, he became a great friend of Khwaja Malik Ali.

There is a story told that the saint was worried about the bachelor state of my ancestors who had come, leaving their women in Herat. There was a family of the descendants of an earlier saint, settled around the tomb of *Makhdoom Sahebn*. One day Bu Ali Shah invited the heads of both these families to dinner. At the *dastarkhwan*, the conventional white cloth spread on the carpet for meals, was a simple repast consisting of chapaties and only two dishes—mutton *khorma* or spiced curry, and curds. Bu Ali Shah poured the curds in the curry and invited both his guests to taste the new dish that was a combination of *khorma* and yoghurt. “Don’t you like it?” He asked and both of them had to admit that the mixed dish was better and tastier than either of the constituents. Bu Ali Shah was thereby advocating mixed marriages between these two families, and both the patriarchs took the subtle hint, and negotiated several unions between boys and girls of their respective clans!

The phenomenal veneration that Bu Ali Shah, in his life

and even more so after his death, inspired among both Hindus and Muslims of Panipat and the surrounding towns and villages, illustrates the great emotional and spiritual hold that the Sufi saints had acquired over the local population. The Sufis are no proselytizers and are not known to have converted any substantial number of Hindus, but they established a spiritual communion with the local people and revealed to them the softer, subtler and more acceptable face of Islam. It is interesting to note that the legends that have grown about them, through the ages, are substantially the same that are current about the contemporary saints of the *Bhakti* cult in other parts of India.

For instance, it is said of Sant Tukaram—and it was so depicted in the film of that name—that to teach a lesson to an arrogant local ruler, Tukaram ordered a wall to fly in the air. Likewise, it is said that Bu Ali Shah *Qalander*, dressed in rags as usual, was one day basking in the winter sun on a broken-down wall, when the Sultan of Delhi went past, mounted on a caparisoned elephant.

“Greetings, Bu Ali Shah *Qalander*,” said the king who had heard so much about the “mad” saint.

The saint did not reply.

The king was furious. He said something to the effect. “Eh, you beggar, can’t you see that the king is condescending to speak to you, though he sits on top of an elephant.”

The saint looked up and replied, “Arrogant king, so proud of your elephant. But, if God so wills, this dead and broken wall will walk faster than your elephant.”

And (legend has it) the wall did start moving forward, outpaced the elephant, and only then, beholding this miracle, the king dismounted and fell at the feet of the saint.

I don’t believe in miracles, but I do believe in poetry (which itself is a miracle). It is of significance to me that similarly symbolic tales were told in different parts of India about different saints, Hindu and Muslim, to impress on the common, simple-minded people the superiority of spiritual eminence over temporal power.

I don’t know if Bu Ali Shah *Qalander* had occasion to study Hindu scriptures, but (like Kabir after him) he was undoubtedly a universalist, treating his Hindu and Muslim devotees with

equal affection and consideration, without any distinction. He was unawed by the pomp and panoply of power, and (like the others before and after him) his sympathies were invariably for the poor, the lowly and the down-trodden.

I don't know if he was acquainted with the spiritual discipline in yoga, but it is believed that he stood on one leg in the waters of the Yamuna (which then flowed near Panipat) for seven years till the flesh on his leg was nibbled and finally eaten by the fishes.

Bu Ali Shah (popularly known as Qalander Saheb) was one of the few persons in history who are supposed to have been buried in more than one place. Besides the mausoleum in Panipat there were tombs in the district town of Karnal, twenty miles from Panipat, and in the village of Kunjpura, which were also associated with the name of Qalander Saheb.

Legend has it that the saint died at a lonely place which was equidistant from Panipat, Karnal and Kunjpura. So the people from all these three places turned up to claim the body, for the town where the saint was buried would be blessed forever. They started quarrelling and fighting about who had prior claim upon the dead saint, but when they lifted the ragged sheet that lay over him, they discovered only a pile of flowers which were divisible by three. So each party took one third of the flowers and buried it in their own place. This sort of thing is also supposed to have happened when Kabir died, and there was a tussle between Hindus and Muslims as to whether his body would be burnt or buried. Then the flowers are supposed to have appeared and were equally divided between the two warring sects to raise a *samadhi* or to build a grave over them!

To me these legends, like most of religious lore, have only a symbolic significance as the ancients' way to teach the ethics of humanism to the simple people poetic parables.

But I am rather struck by the secular and proletarian affinities of the Sufi saints and their ready acceptance by the Muslim and the Hindu masses. Rajput and Maratha warriors might have challenged the supremacy of the Muslim rulers but no one seems to have ever opposed the spiritual sway of the Muslim Sufi saints who came to be venerated by the people of all faiths as good men of God.

After several hundred years, the tomb of Bu Ali Shah *Qalander* still attracted devotees, including Hindu devotees, not only from the surrounding areas, but also from other parts of India. Did it signify only the superstitious nature of the Indian people, or the assimilation of the basic ethics of the Islamic faith in the catholic Hindu consciousness?

When a great Sufi soul leaves the mortal coils, he is not said to die. It is the marriage or merger of his soul with the Divine Being. (To use a parallel expression from *yoga*, the *atma* becomes a part of the *Paramatma*!) So his death is not an occasion for mourning. It is not his death anniversary that is commemorated, but his *Urus* (which means "marriage" with the Divine Being) that is celebrated. The annual *Urus* of Qalander Saheb was the big social event of Panipat. For a whole week thousands would throng the square in front of the mausoleum, shops and booths would be put up displaying a fascinating array of aromatic sweets, toys, bangles for girls and a hundred other things that were not normally sold in the shops of our little town of twenty thousand people. The circus and, later, the moving picture shows would visit Panipat and do roaring business, encamped on the open space on the top of the *Qila* or the old ruined fort that was a mass of rubble in the centre of the town. Being right within the compound of the saint's mausoleum, the little boys of our primary school had a grandstand view of the exciting goings-on.

All through the days and nights of the *Urus* there would be *qawwali*—the songs of devotion and spiritual ecstasy that were sung to proclaim the greatness of God, His Prophet, the saints and the Sufis. Some of the *qawwalis* were in Urdu but others were in classical Persian, which was but natural, for originally the ritual had come from the Sufis of Iran. At that early age, I could not understand the meaning of the Persian couplets but I could sense the resonant power and beauty of their passionate eloquence, and the ear-tickling rhythm played by the clapping hands of the *qawwals*. And, occasionally, someone—layman or Sufi or mendicant—would respond with *haal*, or ecstatic movements of the head or whole body, which swayed or even danced to the rhythm of the *qawwali*! Like the dancing dervishes, the men would dance and everyone would be in awe of the man and his ecstasy. The singers would sing with

extra vigour, the handclapping would beat out faster and fiercer rhythms, and the dancer would whirl in ecstasy till he collapsed on the marble floor in a state of unconsciousness.

My father, who was an austere reformer, would tell me that all that was un-Islamic and motivated by other than religious or spiritual considerations. The *qawwals* sang for the money that was paid to them, without understanding the spiritual content of the verses, the dancing of the ecstatic dervishes was all showoff, an exhibition of their supposed communion with the soul of the saint, the maddening rhythm that induced the *haal* was but a musical trick with faster and faster clapping of the hands.

5. Caravan of Terror

It would be gratifying for me to be able to record that even as a child I had literary ambitions. But it wouldn't be true.

My childhood ambition was—believe it or not—to be an engine driver or a railway guard. . . .

Every year, for a month or two in the holidays, we went and stayed in the same *serai-wala makaan* near the railway station where I was to have been the sacrificial lamb on the altar of social reform.

The whole day I would be out on the platform of the small and sleepy railway station where the station master, the booking clerk, the old signalman and the solitary tea-vendor knew me and extended their indulgence to my childish pranks and play-acting. Only two daily passenger trains passed in each direction, besides occasional goods trains and the rare specials to carry the *Laath Saheb* from Delhi to Kalka (on the way to Simla) and back. The mail trains, which did not stop at our little Panipat station, went past at night and I would lay awake in my mother's room waiting for the Mail to come shrieking out of the night and thunder past, almost shaking the mud-plastered walls of our house.

There was something about the rhythm, the speed, the clatter of the wheels of a railway train, that excited my imagination as a child and, to some extent, that fascination has still not waned. (A homeopathic doctor once told me that the fact that I felt better, and wrote more easily, in a moving railway train was the key to my physical constitution!)

But after some time, my occupational fascination shifted from engine driver or guard of a train. When the circus came to Panipat, and I was taken to see the acrobats and the rope-walkers, the ring master in a glittering costume putting the lions and tigers through their paces, and the clowns with their antics, I was absolutely enthralled. Now I wanted to be an acrobat—

the daring young man on the flying trapeze—who always got wild applause from the spectators. After the circus was gone, I would even practise doing tricks on a *jhoola* (swing) which hung from the ceiling in our house, swinging from one trapeze to the other—all in my imagination.

Even this fascination gave way to another when I first encountered the “magic” of the “silent” silver screen. The shadows that moved, that walked—the funny little man in a comic hat and baggy trousers, with funny moustache and a comical walk that made everybody laugh, the thrilling adventures of Eddie Polo and his girl friend, Nan (which our movie heroes and the stunt men duplicating for them, are still trying to emulate fifty-five years later), the sheer thrill of watching on the screen the cliff-hanging scenes which provided one—specially a child—both with excruciating pain at the hero’s and heroine’s discomfiture, and a strange kind of pleasure at their ultimate rescue and the end of the mustachioed bad man.

It was my first and elemental contact with the fascinating miracle of cinematic drama which one day would be one of my professions, preoccupations and obsessions. But at that time I had never thought of *creating* this drama or this suspense or these thrills, I was merely interested in watching them. And to have a perennial opportunity of watching these delectable performances night after night, I secretly aspired to be a cinema-operator-cum-barker who operated the magic but silent shadows and provided a glib tongued commentary—something (I still remember after fifty-five years) like this: “*Dekho—dekho—yeh Eddie Polo ki mashooka Naan hai—*” and then referring to her adorable puffed-up dimpled cheeks—“*Naan kya hai, achchi khaasi phooli hui dabal roti hai!*” (Look, look, this is Eddie Polos’ beloved Naan—Why *Naan* (Indian baked flat bread), she looks like a puffed-up [English-type] bread.)

If I had had an opportunity, I would have run away from home and joined a travelling movie operator as his assistant. But when I gingerly and fearfully—with a wildly beating heart—approached him in the light of one day, and asked him where he kept his moving pictures, he pointed to some flat, round tins and brought out a snake-like ribbon on which, between two long lines of perforations (holes, as I then thought them to be) there were tiny, transparent, black and white pictures which were

neither moving nor magical. And looking at them, at his battered black box and tripod and the dusty enclosure (which would be filled with magic in the night), in the disillusioning light of day, cured me of all the fascination of the cinema screen. I went back to school, rid of the compelling distraction which had held me for the days the "travelling bioscope" was in our town.

The annual visits of the inspector of schools to our little primary school around the three marble graves were exciting and colourful events that were landmarks in our scholastic career. The visit would be announced weeks in advance and hectic preparations would start. The filthy coir mats on which we sat would be taken out of the rooms, washed, dried, then re-spread on the clean swept ground. Books would be covered with coloured or at least khaki paper. Slates would be repaired and blackboards scrubbed. New maps would be hung on the walls, including the map of India, with the British India in gaudy pink and princely India in a series of sickly yellow blotches. Every boy would be enjoined to come on the appointed day in clean clothes and (at least for this day) with proper shoes even if he had to borrow them for the occasion. Turbans, whether habitually worn or not, were compulsory for the inspector's visit, a different colour for each class—pink for the first, green for the second, yellow for the third, and blue for the fourth. We would get the muslin cloth dyed, starched and bound by father, elder brother or senior friend to present an impeccable appearance.

The rows of children in each class would be put in straight lines and teachers and students would assume an air of proper academic concentration to pass the scrutiny of the inspector—who would arrive from the district town of Karnal by train and then drive down in a tonga from one school to another in the only vehicle that was available at Panipat station. Preceded by an impressively turbaned *chaprasi*, carrying the awesome inspection book, the inspector would arrive, and his entry was the signal for all boys to respectfully stand to attention and only be seated when the great dignitary beckoned us to sit down. There would be questions to test our intelligence and, above all, the loyalty of the students as well as teachers. The stock

question was to ask us to enumerate the blessings of the British Raj.

"You," the inspector saheb asked the boy next to me, "Tell us: what are the blessings of the British Raj?"

We had been asked to repeat and remember them by rote—"The British government has done much for India—built roads, railways, post offices, schools, hospitals. . . ."

But the boy, not a very bright specimen, began fumblingly, in Urdu, of course, since not even our teachers knew any English, "*Janab Inspector Saheb, Bartanvi hakoomat ne hamaray liye banayeen sadken, railen, daak khanay . . .*" (The British government has built for us many roads, railways, schools, hospitals, post offices. . . .)

Then he forgot the list and fumbled to a stop.

"And. . . and. . . ?" the inspector prompted, hoping to hear the rhyming words of *shafa khaanay* (hospitals) and *kutub khanay* (libraries), etc.

"*Aur kaun bata sakta hai?* Who else can answer?" The inspector asked and promptly I raised my hand. It was soon after the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to our town, and I knew that the Mahatma had been put in prison. So I knew one category of *khanay* that the other boy had, of course, forgotten.

"Yes," the inspector saheb turned to me and smiled encouragingly at the smallest boy in the class, repeating the other boy's catechism to prompt me, "*Railen, sadken, daak khanay. . . ?*"

"*Qaid khanay,*" I shouted aloud triumphantly, referring to the prisons where the Mahatma, the Ali brothers and many of their followers had been imprisoned.

The inspector saheb was not amused, and certainly not pleased to hear my answer, though I was satisfied that "*qaid khanay*" rhymed with "*daak khanay.*"

"Stand up," he bellowed and I stood, my legs shaking, my heart beating fast.

"What do you know about *qaid khanay*—the prisons?"

"*Janab—Sir,*" I replied respectfully, "I hear Mahatma Gandhi and the Ali brothers are living there in *qaid khanay*?"

"What do you know about Gandhi?" he sharply questioned me, as the teacher and the whole class watched the inspector's rising temper with bated breath and apprehension.

"Sir—Sir," I sheepishly and not very defiantly muttered—

"I saw him—when he came to my grandfather's house."

"Sit down" the inspector bellowed, "Remember Gandhi is in prison because he is a *baaghi* and a *ghaddaar*!"

Then he walked out, after giving me a baleful stare, our class teacher following him obsequiously with folded hands.

We saw the inspector standing by the side of the three marble graves calling for the inspection book and scribbling something in it with, it seemed, ferocious fury. Then, preceded by the peon holding the inspection book, he stalked out of the gate, got into the tonga and drove away.

But when my father came on the weekend from Delhi and I told him about the incident he patted me on the back and said "*Shabash*." (Well done!) Perhaps, that paternal pat on the back was my undoing, and encouraged me eventually to become outspoken, rude, rebellious, a nonconformist, and perennially anti-Establishment!

I do not know for certain whether the traumatic experience that follows had the relationship of effect and cause with the visit of the inspector to our school. Anyway, it was as much symptomatic of those times as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of which we, as children, had vaguely heard and of the all-India tours of Mahatma Gandhi and the other leaders in the course of which he had come even to the sleepy little town of Panipat.

Across the years, I remember, one morning when all the little boys of our school, in long snake-like single file, moved through the winding lanes of our town in the direction of the Grand Trunk Road, beyond which lay the station, with the railway line to Ambala and Kalka and Lahore running parallel to it.

When we reached the Grand Trunk Road we saw ours was not the only school that had been ordered to undertake this early morning march. From all the lanes and streets emerging out of the town were coming similar lines of schoolboys, big and small, from all the primary schools, middle schools and the two high schools—the Jain High School and the Hali Muslim High School—both of which were situated on the same Grand Trunk Road out of the town.

Soon, the rows of boys were strung on both sides of the road. In the early cool morning, it was a kind of picnic though,

unlike other picnics, we neither carried any refreshments with us nor could we see any signs of food or drink. We were just ordered to stand in a straight line—the boys from the Muslim schools facing the rows of boys from the Hindu schools. (Was this confrontation some kind of deliberate and macabre symbolism? I now wonder.)

Soon the sun was out and it began to grow hot for it was a summer day. We stood and waited and since our teachers who kept on parading in front of our rows were looking to the north in the direction of Ambala, we did the same, craning our necks to catch a glimpse of what we knew not. But whatever it was, it was coming from the north.

We were not allowed to talk, even to shuffle our tired feet.

A little boy who sat down was immediately asked to stand up by his teacher, who ominously pointed to the khaki-turbaned police officers who were also patrolling the highway.

It was almost noon and we were feeling giddy under the sun, the sparse shade of the roadside trees providing an inadequate umbrella, when we saw something moving along the road. First it was just a moving cloud of dust, then horsemen emerged out of it. With a steady clop-clop-clop the cavalry was riding on their horses—turbaned Indian mounted soldiers, some were Sikhs with beards, some were Gurkhas with their funny cocked hats, some fair-skinned Pathans and Punjabis—each carried a rifle held ready in his hand, and after every ten *sawars* riding abreast was a white faced English officer, with a revolver in his belt. Soon they were fling past in front of us and we were truly scared by the silent, seemingly grim countenances of the Indian soldiers and their English officers.

Clop-clop-clop went the steady rhythm of the cavalry, made grimmer by the metallic jangle of the stirrups and the reins and the saddles.

Silently the caravan of terror was passing, and the boys were duly scared, intimidated, frightened of the immense power that it represented.

After the cavalry came even more columns of artillery—machine-guns mounted on trucks and seemingly aimed at us, lined on either side of the road—large-barrelled artillery guns pulled by mules, the like of which (I had heard) could fire

their shells and land them at a distance of a hundred miles. There were other weapons, too, whose names we were still unfamiliar—it was a parade of power designed to instil the fear of the might of the British Raj in the susceptible hearts and minds of the younger generation of Indians—for at that moment in every town and village, all the way from Lahore to Delhi, hundreds of thousands of schoolboys were likewise lined on the two sides of that road.

Seeing those soldiers, especially the red faced officers (like monkeys' behinds, as we used to whisper), flashed across my mind what I had heard from my father, and read, about Jallianwala Bagh in an Urdu paper that he used to bring from Delhi with him. So this was the army men and their English officers who had fired at that unarmed crowd of holidaymakers trapped within the four walls of the Bagh in Amritsar only a few months ago.

The summer sun was now at its zenith, one of my little friends, who had been holding on to his urge to urinate, wet his pajamas and felt so humiliated that he began to whimper and cry. Another student in the line opposite fainted—obviously from sunstroke—and had to be carried away by a couple of teachers. But the inexorable caravan of terror continued to march on!

But elsewhere (I learnt years later) among the schoolboys who watched this punitive march of British army, staged for their edification and terrorization, some at least had a different reaction. Among them, I understand, was a Sikh boy of gentle features who reacted to this show of force with a smouldering bitterness that would explode one day into a terroristic bomb explosion. His name was Bhagat Singh—only a couple of years older than me!

If this was a novel, and not an autobiography, I would be tempted to follow this politically significant incident reacting on a child's mind to produce a melodramatic patriotic reaction, like picking up a Congress flag and marching at the head of a procession. But there were no such incidents, indeed there were hardly any political processions and demonstrations in our sleepy old crumbling town.

Soon my father was to drive the arrogant snobbery out of me. I had heard school urchins calling each other *Ulloo ka pattha* (son of an owl), a minor and almost respectable term of abuse. One day I asked a little boy who was the son of a servant of ours to give me a glass of water. When he didn't hear me (I thought he deliberately did so) I loudly called him *Ulloo ka pattha*. My father overheard the remark and told my mother, "Bachhoo is to be locked up in a room and not given any food till he apologizes to this little boy."

I was too proud to apologize so easily. I lay in the hot, dark room, sulky and angry and hungry for an hour, two hours, three hours, while outside I heard my mother plead with father to excuse me and let me have some food.

"No," my father was firm, "Not till he apologizes to the servant's boy. He must now learn to regard all human beings as equal—or he will always think of himself as superior to others."

When I was locked up it was twelve o'clock. By six in the evening my hungry intestines were rebelling within me and I was knocking on the closed door.

"Are you ready to apologize?" My father asked.

"Yes, Abba !" I sheepishly and almost inaudibly replied.

"Open the door," commanded my father and my mother complied.

I was led to the servant's little son and with folded hands had to say, "*Maaf karo bhai*," (Excuse me, brother) then embrace him. Only then was my mother allowed to serve me dinner. It was the most important lesson—and the most significant gift—that my father gave me in my life.

My father asked me what I would like as a present to celebrate my transfer to the big school, "A hockey stick, a cricket bat or a football?" He was sure I would choose one of these.

But my mind was set on a different present. I wanted the daily Urdu newspaper which my father sometimes brought home with him from Delhi.

I think it was called *Roznama Hind*, the *Daily Hind*. It had all the exciting news about the great things that were happening in the country and the world.

So I mentioned it to him and he readily agreed. In fact, he

was pleasantly surprised and said an intelligent boy needed to have a “window on the world.”

“A window on the world?” I repeated in surprise.

“Yes, son, that’s what a newspaper is supposed to be.”

6. The Mahatma and the Old Weaver Woman!

I was about five or six years old when I first set eyes on Mahatma Gandhi. I have only a hazy recollection of the details of the occasion, how and why he had come, and in what connection. But I have a distinct memory of the strong impact his personality made on a child's mind.

Gandhiji must have come to Panipat during his tour of the Punjab, after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre for which Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the Governor, was holding the Mahatma responsible. Also "some irate young Punjabis held me responsible for the martial law," as Gandhiji wrote at that time in his autobiography. "They asserted that if only I had not suspended civil disobedience there would have been no Jallianwala Bagh." All this I was to know and understand much later.

Panipat must have been the very first stop for Gandhiji as he travelled to Lahore from Delhi, even as it was the first stop for the armies of Delhi when they came out to fight the invaders from the north. Hence the three battles of Panipat.

The meeting which he addressed was held in the house of one of my grandfathers—Khwaja Akhlaq Husain, who was then the president or vice-president of the local Khilafat Committee. I don't remember the speech Gandhiji delivered at that time. Sitting in the lap of my grandfather, I was watching the kindly eyes of the Mahatma, who wore a shirt and dhoti of the coarsest khaddar woven with yarn spun, they said, by himself. It was the time of close cooperation between the Congress and the Khilafat Committee, and *Hindu-Muslim ki Jai*—*Bharat Mata ki Jai* were the two slogans that were repeated over and over again. As I said, while I don't remember what Gandhiji said I can have a shrewd guess from the reaction that his speech produced on a neighbour of ours—the old weaver woman Hakiman, who was called Hakko by the elders but whom we

were admonished to call *Nani Hakko!* (Grandmother Hakko!)

Gandhiji came, spoke, created an unforgettable impression on a child's mind, and then went on his way to Amritsar and Lahore on the more important mission to assuage the angry and embittered people. But Grandmother Hakko remained in Panipat to remind us of the message and the impact of the Mahatma. Indeed, it is her personality that created as great an impression on my childish mind as the great Gandhi himself.

I still remember the face of the poor, old woman, a weaver by caste and profession, who lived in our immediate neighbourhood during the years of my childhood. She was dark, ugly, with deep wrinkles on her dark pockmarked face, relieved by the silvery strands of her grey hair. No one—not even she herself—knew her exact age, but she must have been very old, she had been a widow for twenty years.

Since her husband's death she had been working with her own strong hands to bring up her children, carrying on single-handed the family business of weaving cloth on an ancient handloom, besides doing all the household chores. Old and asthmatic as she was, she would always get up before sunrise. Even in winter months, while we still lay warmly wrapped up in our heavy quilts, we could hear the grinding, monotonous music of the *chakki* (handmill) from her house. As we passed in front of her door, on the way to the school or the bazar or played in the narrow lane with her grandchildren, we could see Grandmother Hakko at work—sweeping the floor or plastering it with mud, cooking, washing the clothes of her sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, or seated at her loom, her gout-ridden legs hidden in the pit. All weavers must dig such a pit in the ground to keep themselves level with the warp which is stretched only a few inches above the ground. As, with her dexterous hands, she wove the woof into the warp, the rhythmic beats of the flying shuttle—*khat tana pat nalee*, as we used to mimic the sound—drew all the children of the neighbourhood to Hakko's place.

"Grandmother Hakko, Grandmother Hakko," we would tease her, "Where are your legs?" and she would smile indulgently and reply, "My legs are where my wisdom is"—anticipating the popular adage that "A weavers's wisdom lives in a hole." Now that I think of it, I marvel at Grandmother

Hakko's remarkable sense of humour. She certainly could laugh at herself.

Grandmother Hakko lived in a shoebox kind of adjunct to our big *haveli*—a tiny mudwalled outhouse with just two small rooms, a narrow verandah and a few square yards of unpaved courtyard plastered with mud. Yet she kept it so clean that in the neighbourhood there was a current saying that in Hakko's house one could eat parched rice straight off the floor.

Grandmother Hakko would toil from sunrise to sunset, but whenever she came to our place—and it was generally at night—we found her always smiling and in good spirits. What a cheerful old soul she was! Despite her gout and asthma, she had a strong, working woman's constitution. To her dying day, we never saw her back bent. Only some of her *pan* and tobacco stained teeth dropped out, giving her mouth a cavernous look whenever she laughed and giving us children another excuse to tease her. "Grandmother Hakko! Grandmother Hakko! Where have your teeth gone?" To which, of course, she would give the expected reply, "Shall I tell you the truth, children? This is what happened. When I was asleep, some naughty little mice came and ran away with my teeth." In all my life I have met no one who could laugh at herself so spontaneously.

She was a great favourite with the old as well as the young because she talked so pleasantly and entertainingly, with never a word of malicious gossip or scandal. Whenever we could drag her away from her nightly confabulations with the older women of our household, all the children would gather round Grandmother Hakko and ask her to tell us a story. She was a grand storyteller and, wide-eyed with wonder, we would listen to her tales of three princes, seven princesses, giants that were bigger than mountains and fairies that lived in flowers, horses that had wings and parrots that talked! She could not read or write, but she must have had a lively imagination as well as a wonderful memory to have told us all those stories and told them so well. (Was it she—and her stories—that made me a story-writer?)

Then the Mahatma came in her life and in our lives.

Along with the Ali brothers, he came to our town of Panipat. They addressed a public meeting in my grandfather's house and spoke about the thrillingly new concepts of swaraj and non-

cooperation with the British government. Grandmother Hakko, too, quietly sat in a corner and listened attentively to the speeches, drinking in every word that fell from the Mahatma's lips. She was particularly fascinated by what he had to say about the significance of the spinning wheel and handloom, and she smiled understandingly when he called them "weapons in our battle for freedom." She knew how to handle these weapons! At the end of the meeting when collections were made for the swaraj fund, Hakko calmly took off all her ornaments—the bunch of earrings, the necklace, the bangles and the wristbands—and placed them into the Mahatma's "beggar's bowl." Following her example, many other women, too, donated jewellery—a ring here, an earring or nosering there, a pair of bangles or a necklace. But there could be no comparison with Hakko's donation, for she had given away her entire life's savings—and the hopes of her childrens' future—to the cause of the nation.

Since then, she would come to our house every evening and ask my grandfather for the news of Gandhiji and his doings. As the old gentleman read out the paper aloud to her, gurgling his hookah all the time, she would interrupt him with some naive question: "When will this rule of the *firangees* end, Khwaja Saheb?" or "How is our Mahatma Saheb's health? He looked very weak and thin when he came here." She would attend all meetings held by the Congress and the Khilafat Committee, sitting not in the curtained-off enclosure reserved for women but right in the front row with men, and she would try to understand the political speeches as much as she could. Then she would come to our place and ask grandfather, with a deep sigh, "But will this swaraj come in *my* lifetime, Khwaja Saheb?" For the first time Hakko was found concerned with the thought of her death.

Her eyes were beginning to fail and she could work only by touch and by the dint of lifelong practice. The gout had practically paralyzed her legs and she was no longer able to walk even up to our house. Her sons told her to give up all work and to rest. But she did not give up spinning and, when no one was in the house, she would drag herself to the loom and start weaving. *Khat tana pat nalee*—the shuttle would fly at the

command of her practised fingers, as we ran up to her. "Grandmother Hakko! What are you weaving?" And her reply mystified us, for she said, "I am weaving a *kafan* (shroud) for myself." We did not know then what a shroud was but I know now the significance of what she said. In those days, people were buried, wrapped up in shrouds of *lat-tha*—the fine, glossy, foreign-made longcloth. But when Hakko died, her last will was that she should be given the shroud that she had finished weaving only a day before she passed away. She was the first one to be buried in a *khaddar ka kafan*—a patriot unto death!

Forty-five years later, on a visit to my ancestral birthplace, I went to see the local *Qabristan* where all my ancestors were buried. I wanted to pay my homage to them and also to Grandmother Hakko whose grave was next to my grandmother's. I knew this had to happen, because almost all the Muslims of Panipat (with the exception of my immediate family) were forced to evacuate to Pakistan in 1947. I know, even otherwise, graves have to be dug up sometimes. And yet it was an emotional shock for me to see the graveyard ploughed over. If only they had spared only one grave—the grave of Grandmother Hakko, the old weaver woman who had given her all to the Mahatma, and woven her own *kafan* on her handloom. For she was the first woman in whose image I saw the face of Mother India!

7. Bhaijan

Since Saiyidain was my first cousin, and since I had no brother of my own, I called him Bhaijan. Ten years older than me, he was always my hero and my ideal, the one shining symbol of perfection to which I always secretly aspired. That was why I was so excited at the idea of showing my first published essay to Bhaijan, as suggested by my father—and why I persuaded my father to let me go to Aligarh to live with Bhaijan even though I had only just passed the seventh class examination.

The earliest recollections of my childhood are replete with the memories of Bhaijan's astonishing series of academic triumphs. First class first in Punjab Matriculation. The youngest graduate from Aligarh—and again first class first. A champion debater and orator, and at the same time a good tennis player. Editor of the university magazine with already a distinctive literary style, both in Urdu and in English. After graduation he could have easily got into the I.C.S. and climbed to the highest rungs of the bureaucracy. But, with characteristic idealism, he voluntarily chose to follow in the footsteps of his and my grandfather, Khwaja Sajjad Husain, and adopted the humbler career of an educationist. With a Government scholarship, he proceeded to Leeds for a master of education degree. One of the first Indian students to distinguish himself in a British university, he again secured first class first and returned to his *alma mater*, Aligarh, to join the teachers' training college as the youngest professor in the university. He was barely twenty-one and with his trim good looks, bright eyes and a thick mop of black hair, he looked more like an undergraduate than a member of the faculty.

One of the most vivid memories of my boyhood—and one of the most formative influences which moulded my own destiny—was the debate that was held in Aligarh in 1925 on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the Mohamedan Anglo-

Oriental College, the precursor of the Muslim University. The cream of the Muslim intelligentsia was present on the occasion.

Saiyidain, who had just returned after his academic triumphs in England, was given the honour of opening the jubilee debate under the auspices of the University Union. He chose a subject which was then, as it is half a century later, of vital significance to India. He moved, in effect, that Indian Muslims should not organize themselves politically on communal lines but must work, together with the nationalists of other communities, for the freedom and progress of the nation as a whole.

He made a short and persuasive opening speech. Then came an oratorical barrage of opposition from the "big guns" of Muslim politics assembled on the dais—including Mr M.A. Jinnah, the Aga Khan and Sri Ali Imam, each one of them a formidable host unto himself. They spoke with power and passion, and patronizingly dismissed the arguments of the youthful mover of the proposition as irresponsible youthful idealism. I remember Saiyidain sitting in a corner, seemingly overwhelmed by the powerful and authoritative voices of his elders, but furiously taking notes.

Then came the climactic moment when he rose to reply to the debate. I was too young then to fully comprehend the trend of his arguments, but even an eleven-year old boy could sense the power and passion with which the flow of his oration was charged. The impact of that speech must have left a deep impression on my subconscious because since then, even as a boy, I could never be swayed by the passion-filled arguments of the communalists. If the secular and humanist concept of life has remained an integral part of my own personal credo, I owe it first of all to that speech and subsequently to the years I spent in school and university under the personal guardianship of Saiyidain. To the same influence I owe also the awakening of my intellectual curiosity, the taste I developed for literature, drama and the arts.

Saiyidain succeeded, by the sheer weight of his arguments and the persuasive power of his eloquence, to trounce the formidable array of his distinguished opponents. His proposition was "carried" by an overwhelming majority, and Mr Jinnah took at least ten years to recover from the shock of

that defeat which he suffered in the presence of the most representative gathering of Muslim intelligentsia.

I often wonder what would have been the destiny of India—and of Indian Muslims—if the communally-inclined Muslims had heeded the warning of the youthful idealist on the Aligarh University platform. Surely then there would have been no partition, no Pakistan, no riots, no exchange of populations—and no genocide in Bangladesh! There are many who believe that a dedicated talent like that of Saiyidain would have served the cause of India better if he had taken to politics, and not restricted his interests and activities to education.

His passionate devotion to the cause of education, which he had made his own, sometimes gave him the semblance of a one-track mind. But it was not so. His interests ranged from poetry to politics, from Islamic metaphysics to modern American drama—he would put down a tome on philosophy to take up a novel of P.G. Wodehouse or the latest issue of *Punch*!

Indeed, what saved this great intellectual and erudite scholar from being a pedantic snob was his unfailing and delightfully infectious sense of humour. During the many years that I spent in Aligarh under his roof and under his guardianship, I remember, the conversation round the dining table was always lively, witty, enlivened by Saiyidain's humorous and meaningful anecdote, the epigrammatic turn of phrase, and the occasional flash of irony and satire. For us, it was a daily intellectual exercise to sit at that table, the conversation would range far and wide, and encompass all the seven arts, and woe unto the ignorant young man who did not know the difference between Einstein and Epstein, and confused both of them with Eisenstein. They say that to be a barrister one must consume so many dinners at the inns of court. But I have no doubt that I learnt more at that dining table presided over by Saiyidain than from all the lectures I had to suffer in our classrooms.

Above all else I learnt to love books, to love life in all its varied manifestations, I learnt that it was possible to be serious-minded without taking oneself too seriously. It is to those "literary" meals that I owe the development of my interest in writing. My very first amateurish attempts at literary

composition were corrected by Bhaijan who had the great editor's gift of being able to improve the construction of a sentence beyond recognition by the merest touch of the proverbial blue pencil.

There is much that I owe to Bhaijan but, above all else, I owe to him the perception of the purpose of life—to seek knowledge without pedantry, to serve fellow humans without assuming patronizing or supercilious airs, to enjoy a joke even at one's own expense, to laugh with others and not laugh *at* others. I had not always agreed with him—for instance I doubted the wisdom of his emphasis on religion—but he was disarmingly reasonable, and his religion was so humanistic and universal, that it was difficult to disagree with him.

Most of my life, since I began to lose my hair, I was mistaken for his “elder brother” though, in fact, I was ten years younger. Saiyidain's fresh, youthful look, like the perennial youth of Jawaharlal Nehru, with whom he shared many of his qualities and his interests, was not merely a physical phenomenon. This remarkable “freshness” which he retained while he was principal of the training college, Director of Education in Kashmir or in Bombay, or Secretary to the Central Ministry of Education, came from inner peace which only those few fully integrated human beings can experience who know what is their duty and also know that they *are* doing it.

A few days before his death, when the Indo-Pak war had broken out, he had recorded a talk in Urdu from his sickbed, which was broadcast to Pakistan (ironically enough, it was on the air at the exact moment that he was breathing his last). In it he had given expression to his unbearable anguish at the tragic turn of events. The talk was in Urdu, but he paraphrased the gist of it in English:

One of the most traumatic experiences, through which I have passed, has been the recent tragedy of East Bengal. There have been greater tragedies in human history, as bad or worse, but this one is so near, geographically and emotionally, that its impact has been literally unbearable. I have always wished Pakistan well and I still wish it well. I have a number of friends and relatives in West Pakistan

but hardly any personal contacts in the East. Normally, therefore, in any conflict between them, my sympathies would have been with the former. But is this a 'normal' situation when its military rulers have unleashed a reign of terror and genocide? . . . It has presented before the world an unlovely and untrue picture of Islam, because Pakistan calls itself an 'Islamic' state. How can one bear testimony, under the circumstances, *against* justice and compassion, and live honourably with oneself?

Then, quoting the Prophet who said that the true believers should do everything to stop a brother Muslim from treading the wrong path, he concluded: "The true friends of Pakistan are not those who approve of the policy of its government, but those who have the audacity and the sense of compassion to protest against it."

And, this he did, from his sickbed while his brave but thrice-wounded heart was failing, in a voice quivering with emotion, when he proclaimed the truth to the people of Pakistan—penetrating the curtain of falsehoods and jingoistic propaganda that had kept out the truth from them for so long.

Even as he lay dying, the radio was broadcasting this speech of his which, as it were, was his will and testament. Only he did not hear it.

A young professor from an American university arrived in Delhi to find out if there was a "meaningfully unifying" spirit of India in this "land of diversity and variety, of factions and disunity," and got an answer when he went to the funeral of Saiyidain, who died on the day that Bangladesh was liberated—17 December 1971.

Ironically enough, Saiyidain was one of the persons the young American had been advised to meet on arrival, but when he reached his house in Jamianagar, near Delhi, it was only to join the mournful crowd having their last glimpse.

In a moving and deeply perceptive article contributed to a Delhi newspaper, he recorded his impressions of the astonishing variety of mourners which was to reveal to him not only the truth of the dead man's personality but "the truth about India, and perhaps about mankind."

And the visitor from another country asked: "What sort of man was he who had so deeply affected such a wide variety of people? What sort of forces formed his personality? I learned that he was not a political leader, nor held power of money or position. What was in his being that bound people of such opposing tendencies and beliefs and ideologies together, in the bond of a common grief and common sense of loss? . . . perhaps he was a man of unique versatility. . . perhaps he was admired outside for his universal humanism and yet was essentially Indian. . . How could one man attain both the depth of mind and intellect, yet breadth of personality, and such varied concerns spread over national and international horizons?"

Every December, about Christmas time, Saiyidain wrote and sent a cyclostyled New Year letter to his numerous friends spread all over the world.

In 1970, he had, among other things, quoted from a speech that he delivered in America at a college where he was honoured, along with the world's great educationists, which he ended on this note: "Science has given us infinite vistas of millions of suns and stars and galaxies. . . But what will avail us, I ask you, if we can walk on the moon or Mars but are unable to walk safely and comfortably in our streets, or ensure the supply of clean air and pure water to our fellow human beings."

He ended the letter with these beautiful words: "And so the days pass into nights and the nights turn into days, bringing the boat nearer to the other bank. But that is no reason for worry. I thank God that the evening of life is lighted with the affection and solitude of some near and dear ones—friends and relations—and at least one can cherish the illusion that these days are not empty or entirely wasted."

For the last time, at the end of 1971 (perhaps with the premonition of the impending end) he wrote it earlier, on 7 December, ten days before his death. In what turned out to be his last greeting to his friends, most of whom received it after the news of his death, he summed up the passionate purpose of his dedicated life, and the unique versatility of his personality which had been the cause of the American professor's well-meaning puzzlement.

He began this last testament of his faith with these words: "Even in the midst of a world seething with violence and exploitation, it is good to have a day when persons of goodwill can greet one another with the message of peace, love and fellowship. The Xmas day is such a day, which we should utilize to reinforce our dedication to the idea of Peace, for never has it been more desperately needed."

Saiyidain, all his life, was a teacher, a teacher of teachers, an educationist and an educational philosopher, who had made a critical as well as creative contribution to the evolution of Mahatma Gandhi's scheme of basic education. In his valedictory letter he also sums up his philosophy of education, his ideal of a good teacher, which is wide enough to embrace his passion for peace and sanity.

After referring to the "alarming issues" of "declared and undeclared wars, the nuclear menace and the doom of pollution hanging over mankind, the breakdown of international morality, assaults on human rights, acts of open genocide. . ." he says what the "true teacher" or the conscious, responsible human being should do:

He has to take the crucial decision whether he will work on the side of the forces of light or the forces of darkness, whether he will use all the resources of his mind and spirit for educating children and youth who are compassionate, sensitive, creative, believers in the unity of mankind and in justice for all.

8. I have shed my Tears

In 1925, at the age of eleven, I arrived in Aligarh and stayed with Bhaijan, in a ramshackle house called Bengali Kothi, along with Bhaijan's younger brother, Azhar Abbas, and another cousin Mehboob Ali, both of whom were one class senior to me. Because we stayed on the campus, our status was that of semi-boarders, so that the same restrictions about visiting the station or the city applied to us as to those who stayed in the boarding house.

At that time the university was divided into three stages—there was a middle school upto eighth class, then there was an intermediate college with ninth and tenth classes of the high school, and the first and second year of the college, after which came the university proper with B.A., B.Sc., and post-graduate education for M.A., M.Sc. and LL.B.

I joined the school in the eighth class by special influence—the head master was B.H. Zaidi, a barrister-at-law, and a friend of Bhaijan from England days. I don't know how he was persuaded to become, briefly, the head master, for he was cut up for bigger things. Later he became a judge and minister in Rampur State and, now nearing eighty, is a Congress member of the Rajya Sabha.

The only memorable thing I remember about school was that, being a non-pedantic intellectual, Zaidi Saheb staged a play in which some of the boys from the eighth class took part. It was Tagore's *Post Office* and I played the part of Amal, the little sick boy who waits for the letter to come by post. It was quite an experience, acting in that play, and I sensed the power of histrionic performance. It was before the use of microphones and loudspeakers and one had to depend on one's vocal chords to be audible to the last man in the hall.

My last two years in the Intermediate College were uneventful, except that, every year, I was growing up.

There were debates, and dramas—one year it was Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, and the next year it was the same playwright's *Queen Christina* in which I played a little Cossack officer. I was not cut out to be a hero—and I refused to be a heroine, for goodlooking, beardless boys played the female roles—and so my taking part in the play was just nominal or symbolic. I wanted to be “in”—to get leave from classes, to have meals with the rest of the cast, and to have my name in the programme. I knew that I was not made to shine at sports and games, and the only thing at which I could distinguish myself were the plays, debates and the pages of the magazine.

Bhaijan had married a young lady who was the kindest soul and never minded the infliction of a quarter dozen cousins and brothers. Bhaijan had shifted from Bengali Kothi and built a new house which he called after the name of his wife—Aziz Jehan Manzil. She came from an aristocratic family, but the way she adapted herself to the ways of our plebian family and to Bhaijan's socialistic concepts was remarkable. She looked after all of us as a mother, and we were given outer rooms—one for me, Azhar and Mehboob, and another corner room for yet another student, Najm Naqvi. He used to act the female roles in college (Urdu) plays and after graduation, migrated to Bombay and became an assistant director in Bombay Talkies and, subsequently, a full-fledged director and producer.

This was the time that I produced my first handwritten paper. It was called something like *Aligarh Mail*. (It could be another name—the file of the handwritten paper as well as the two files of *The Aligarh Opinion*, a printed weekly, which I started two years later, were destroyed with all the other papers and photographs in the holocaust of 1947). It was the handwritten paper that was my first serious essay in journalism. At first, it had only local news. But in 1928 when the Simon Commission came and a whole countrywide boycott was organized, it could not avoid turning political.

The classwar was then beginning—there were strikes and peasants' upheavals everywhere—and the news was blacked out or only ridiculed in the columns of the daily *Pioneer* of Lucknow (of Rudyard Kipling fame). So we got the Congress paper, *The Bombay Chronicle*, by post and from there we used to lift

and splash the news of the national movement and the workers and peasants agitation prominently in our handwritten paper. We used to call the *Pioneer* the "Kipling Gazette"—and so we had a banner line on the lines of the *New York Times* "All The News That Is Fit To Print," which said, "All The News That The Kipling Gazette Does Not Think Is Fit To Print."

There would also be local news, but they, too, would be slanted. For instance, in the Union debates, if there was a discussion on "Not dominion status but complete independence should be the immediate political goal of India"—I knew that the officially-approved *Aligarh Magazine* would blackout the discussion, so I would highlight my own speech and other speeches in favour of complete independence. Incidentally, it is interesting to recall that our own Muslim University Intermediate College Union and the Aligarh University Union anticipated the decision of the Congress by a whole year by voting overwhelmingly for complete independence.

At that time some of us had formed a social study circle—under the chairmanship of Professor Kadri of the Geography department—and every Sunday morning, a dozen of us would, bicycle to the surrounding villages, and study the social condition of the villagers who were steeped in poverty, disease and ignorance.

To give us an excuse for our cycled intrusion into village life, and to gain the confidence of the villagers, we would carry with us quinine pills, a bottle of tincture iodine, and boric powder. We would give quinine pills to every one found suffering from any kind of fever, apply iodine to any wound or sore, and mix boric powder with clean water from a thermos which we carried to wash the eyes of children suffering from any kind of eye infection.

The findings of the social study circle would be duly reported in the next week's handwritten paper—and then the social comments would be unrestrained, for the teenaged radicals were appalled by what they observed and gave free expression to their observations. Bhaijan was, of course, our first reader—censor, if you like—but he never took objection to any opinions expressed, his quarrel was always with my spellings, my "split infinitives," and my syntax.

But somehow the principal got wind of our handwritten

paper, and asked me to hand over the file to him. He was a tall man with, what appeared to us, a ferocious moustache. He kept the files for a week and then returned them to me. He asked me if I wrote the whole thing. I admitted my guilt, ready for any punishment. But he only said, "Your handwriting is not good—get a boy with better hand to write it!" Then he shook hands with me and gave me a fair warning. "Next year you are going to the university, let not the British pro-vice-chancellor see your *Aligarh Mail*!" Then he asked me if I was going to fail again in logic, like in my first year examination, and I had to say, "No, Sir, I don't propose to fail this time." He sent me away with a pat on the back.

I took the hint and suspended my handwritten journalism. I concentrated on logic—specially the inductive logic in which paper I had failed in the first year but, in view of my good marks in other subjects, had been promoted.

I could suspend "publication" of my handwritten paper (which, anyway, was read only by a dozen friends) but I could not suspend my interest in political activities. The interest was heightened by the news of the Saunders murder case. In Lahore, some brave young man or men had fired pistol shots at the British police officer who had rained lathis on Lala Lajpat Rai and then they had escaped on bicycles. There were legends about how they changed five caps while pedalling away, and how college students had helped them. But it was in Lahore, a long distance from Aligarh. We wished something like that happened in Aligarh! And we picked up the paper every morning fearing the young men had been arrested and then, not finding the news, heaving a sigh of relief.

Once we were taken by the historical society of the college on a trip to Agra and Delhi—there an archaeologist (I forgot his name—he was a Khan Bahadur, but a very knowledgable man) showed us, with examples of actual buildings, the evolution of Mughal architecture by the fusion of Saracenic and Rajput architecture. On the same trip, we were taken for a visit to the Legislative Assembly in New Delhi. It was a somnolent affair—a few members were actually sleeping on their benches and one of them was a red faced Englishman. The only alert faces were those of Pandit Motilal Nehru and Bhulabhai Desai.

When we returned home, Bhaijan gave me a book to read. It was an Edgar Wallace detective story called *The Four Just Men*. It was a story of a bomb being planted in the House of Commons. I read the story—which was highly engrossing—and wished there were such “Just Men” in India, too. Imagine my surprise when, the very next day, I opened the paper and read in it of the Assembly bomb outrage case. Two young men—Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt, a Punjabi Sikh and a Bengali—had surrendered after throwing a bomb in the Assembly. The bomb did not kill anyone—perhaps it was meant only to make a loud report and to frighten the members of the official bloc. “We wanted the deaf to hear,” said Bhagat Singh, before he raised the revolutionary slogan that would reverberate from one end of the country to the other: *Inqilab Zindabad!* It was exciting news, made for me more exciting because of its proximity to my reading of *The Four Just Men*. After that I followed every detail of the Bhagat Singh case for I took a personal and “proprietary” interest in the phenomenally intrepid young man. He was one of us, he belonged to our generation, felt as we felt, but in daring and self-sacrifice, he had surpassed us.

I read every fact—and fiction—about Bhagat Singh. They had not run away after throwing the bomb. They had not revealed which member had given them passes to go into the Assembly chamber. Bhagat Singh, may be three or four years older than me, was one of the students who had to line up and been made to watch that “caravan of terror” that I had had to watch in 1920. To disguise himself, Bhagat Singh had shaved off his beard and when a Sikh elder remonstrated with him he had said to the effect, “What is the cutting off of a beard when we have decided to have our heads cut off in the service of the nation?”

It was difficult to concentrate on our studies during those exciting days. At its Lahore session, the Congress, under the presidentship of Jawaharlal Nehru, had passed a resolution demanding complete independence for India. Symbolically, Jawaharlal Nehru had hoisted the flag of freedom on the banks of the Ravi, exactly at midnight, as the New Year of 1930 began. The first independence day was observed all over India—and even in Aligarh—on 26 January 1930, when we (along with millions of our country men) read out the independence pledge.

Thereafter the civil disobedience movement was launched, the leaders were arrested, and the no-tax campaign was launched in the villages of U.P.—and, at the other end of the country, at Bardoli, in Gujarat, led by the redoubtable Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. All this we were reading in the pages of *The Bombay Chronicle*, because the *Pioneer* gave only a garbled and governmental version of it!

In January 1931, the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, persuaded Gandhiji to sign the Delhi Pact, but the compassion of the “Christian Viceroy” did not extend to the young men—Bhagat Singh and his comrades—who were under a sentence of death. Contrary to popular desire for the release of the terrorist idealists, nothing was mentioned about them in the Pact.

Then the day arrived—25 March 1931.

I had been studying till late in the night, preparing for my impending intermediate examination, and therefore had not seen the morning paper. When I arrived in college and went to the library I found Zahir Babar Kureishi sitting with a bowed head in a distant corner of library. I went up to him to find out what had happened. I put my hand on his back when I saw he was crying, and this gesture of affection made him cry all the more.

“What’s the matter, Zahir?” I said, and he gave me the morning paper to read.

There, splashed across the front page, was the headline: Bhagat Singh and Other Terrorists Hanged.

Ashamed to make a public demonstration of my sentiments, I walked out of the library, walked out of the college and the campus, crossed the railway line, went to the exhibition grounds which lay desolate and deserted, and only then I sat and cried my heart out.

Looking back over the years, I find that in that moment I shed my boyhood along with the tears.

Then I came home and, locking myself in my room, I wrote an article on what Bhagat Singh and his death meant to me—and to my generation—and automatically I calmed down. I don’t even remember if the article was ever published somewhere. But henceforth, at every tragic turn in my life, writing about it would be a solace—and a solution.

9. Liberty and Love

When I passed my matriculation, my father wanted me to take up biology for an eventual medical career. India—and Indian Muslims, especially—needed conscientious doctors. Medicine itself was a kind of social service, he said.

So for a week I studied biology. Botany I enjoyed, as I was interested in plants and flowers. But zoology was a different kettle of fish altogether. I arrived for my first dissection class and found a dead frog pinned to a board. The moment I looked at the grisly thing and looked at its dead eyes staring at me, and I learnt that I was supposed to dissect it, I decided that my medical career was at an end. I wrote to my father, seeking his permission to change my subjects.

His next choice for me was engineering. Take mathematics, he wrote, so you can become an engineer. Engineering was the hope of the future, he said.

So I changed my subjects, took mathematics with physics and chemistry. But within a month, I knew that differential calculus was beyond me. It appeared to me to be based on abstractions, and I and abstractions have never pulled on well together. Forty days were allowed for any one to change his subjects. And I was in my principal's office exactly on the fortieth day with an application to be allowed to change my subjects. English, history, and logic were the subjects I chose—without consulting my father. When I wrote to him and informed him of the *fait accompli*, he had no option but to agree. "I wanted you to take up an independent career of a doctor or an engineer, but it seems to me you will have to work hard to get into the civil service."

By the time I passed my intermediate examination, standing second in my class, I was no longer amenable to dictation by my father. I had already chosen my career—I would be a journalist. And I chose my subjects accordingly—English literature,

history, political science and economics. (Urdu and theology were compulsory subjects in Aligarh).

Our professor of English literature—Syed Mehmood Husain—was a very erudite scholar. He taught us in a way that would provoke our interest in literature. He never dictated lecture notes and his method of teaching was unique. He told us to read as much as possible—if we had one novel of Galsworthy in our course, he asked us to read all his novels; if we had one tragic play of Shakespeare—we had *Hamlet*—then he would expect us to read all the tragedies of Shakespeare. But in poetry class, I was always questioning the idiom and ideology of the poets—more out of mischief than seriously—and this led to the professor thinking (as he wrote in his certificate) that I was suffering from an “incapacity or, even unwillingness, to appreciate the poetic mode of expression.”

Two diversions kept me busy during the freshman year of university. One was penfriendship with boys and girls in foreign countries, some of whom I was to meet in the course of my world tour in 1938. The other was the correspondentship of the daily newspapers. I became correspondent of the newly started *Hindustan Times* (edited by Pothan Joseph), and the *Bombay Chronicle* (edited by Syed Abdullah Brelvi). Following my example, my cousin Azhar became correspondent of the *Pioneer* and Nafis Ahmed, one of my class fellows who came to be my personal friend, of the *Statesman*. Between us, we had a monopoly of sending out university news; whatever we decided should be highlighted was highlighted, whatever we decided against was ignored. The rates of payment were negligible at that time. The *Bombay Chronicle* job was honorary; they only sent a free copy. The *Hindustan Times* paid three rupees a column—and in a month seldom published reports totalling two or three columns. But the important thing was that we had the power of so many papers at our command, and we earned what was (according to the money scales of that time) not inconsiderable pocket money.

The university was a world of its own, but it was within the larger world of social, economic and political reality of India. Whatever storms raged in the country had their impact on the:

students inside, however protected they might be against outside influences. The main harbingers of revolt were the newspapers and their entry could not be stopped inside the university.

The "Christian" Viceroy—Lord Irwin—had departed and his place was taken by Lord Willingdon who had been Governor of Bombay before that. Gandhiji had prolonged talks with him in Simla and referred to the breaches of the truce from the governmental side. But neither side, it seemed to me, was very keen to observe the suspension of hostilities.

An attempt was made on the life of Lord Hotson, the Governor of Bombay, and we were thrilled to learn that it was a Poona student who had fired pointblank with a revolver. The Governor had a miraculous escape. A week later, Mr Garlick, District Judge of Alipoor, near Calcutta, was assassinated. And we did not see why the AICC had to pass a resolution condemning these events. For us, non-violence was a strategy for an unarmed people, incapable of rising in armed revolt against the foreign rulers, not an article of faith!

It was the height of the swadeshi agitation, and it was a problem for any of us to adapt khaddar for the university uniform. Pajamas we could—and did—make of khaddar, Kurtas or shirts, also proved no problem. But what about the so-called Turkish coat which had to be of thick, woollen material—and, since no such Indian cloth was available, had to be necessarily foreign. Still we solved the problem by getting white khadi dyed pucca black and getting our Turkish coats stitched out of it. Of course, we had to wear several thick sweaters under our coats in winter time when it could be freezing cold in Aligarh. That left the cap which had to be a fez—also called a Turkish cap—which was invariably made by Christys of London, whether of the harder or the softer variety. Perforce we had to be content with using our old fez caps on our heads—but this breach of the swadeshi pledge rankled our consciences.

Then one day I saw an unknown student—he looked like a junior, for I had not seen him before—wearing a fez which was made of maroon-coloured khadi made stiff by using buckram in its lining. He looked extraordinarily smart in his khaddar pajama, tight-fitting black khadi Turkish coat, the stiffened khadi fez set at a rakish angle on his head, and very impressive horn-rimmed glasses on his eyes!

Generally, it was considered *infra dig* for a senior to speak to a junior, but I could not resist the temptation to ask him how, and where, he had his khadi fez made. He told me the address of his tailor who lived and worked in the city. That day half a dozen of us were there, ordering our caps, and the tailor must have made quite a packet out of our patriotism!

That was how I came to know Ansarul Haq Harvani, then an intermediate student, and through him, his elder brother, Asrarul Haq *Majaz*, the poet who died young but who has left behind an astonishingly rich treasure of progressive—even revolutionary—poems of great beauty and power. They were also semi-boarders like us, their father was an excise inspector, and along with their parents and sisters they lived in a little house almost opposite the Girls College, where their sisters were studying. And nearly forty-five years later I have to admit that the geography of his house had much to do with the speed with which my friendship with Ansar developed!

Ansar had one speciality peculiar to him—he always managed to look smart. A midnight visit to the railway station was a must for us in those days, and knowing Bhaijan to be an early sleeper, we would creep out of our rooms at about eleven and bicycle our way to the station. (Later when Bhaijan bought a sporting car for two, we would steal it, pushing it out of the bungalow, and starting it with a duplicate key which my cousin Mehboob had made out of a sardine tin opener. Then we would go to the station, at least four or five of us clinging to various parts of the car).

Since my newly-formed friendship with Ansar, I suggested we cycle round to Marris Road to pick him up on the way. This also had to be done by stealth—he slept in the room next to his father, and the connecting door was kept open. So we simulated a dog's howling, and in answer Ansar would climb out of the window of his room. The very first day it took him a long time to come out—and my companions were getting fidgety, for we might miss the Midnight Mail from Delhi. I asked Ansar what he was doing, taking such a long time. He calmly replied. "I couldn't find my jar of cold cream—I had to grope for it, for I couldn't switch on the light."

"Damn fool," I exclaimed, "what was the necessity of applying cold cream to your face at this hour?"

And he calmly replied, "You never know when you might meet *the girl!*"

However foolish his concern for his impeccable appearance might be, Ansar—with characteristic frankness and forthrightness—had put his finger on the real purpose of our visit to the station which none of us was prepared to admit—even to ourselves!

It was true that the railway station bookstall, even at this late hour, could be open and now and then we might be tempted to buy a magazine or even a book from there. It was also true that at the tea stall one could get hot tea and home-made biscuits which we relished at this hour, specially in the cold season. But it was also true that none of these things would, or could, take us cycling two miles in the cold to the station. It was the off-chance of seeing a pretty face in a women's compartment, or among the entraining or detraining passengers, that took us there. Occasionally, the elegant wife of the Bengali joint magistrate would arrive by that train, in the company of her husband, and we would make a mental note to invite *them*—but really it was *her* that we meant—for the next debate in the Union. Or some women's college girls would come by that train, wearing *burgas* but their faces tantalizingly uncovered, and it would be a thrill for us if one of them happened to look in our direction and smile—for each of us imagined that smile to be directed at himself.

And this would give us an idea—why not have a purdah enclosure for Girls College students at Union functions like debates and annual *mushaira*? The girls should also be given a chance to develop culturally and socially. Even in the midst of these nocturnal outings we never forgot that we were intellectuals and social reformers. And even while parading up and down the platform, our eyes focused on some fair face in a train compartment, making our rounds shorter and shorter, we would be loudly discussing the pros and cons of Gandhiji's departure for London to attend the Round Table Conference or the consequences of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's latest arrest. Love and liberty were the two obsessions of our lives—and we found nothing incongruous in the juxtaposition!

10. First Lessons in Journalism

There was a pipe in the shape of a devil in the mouth—there were a dozen pipes of different shapes and sizes on the table—but the eyes behind the hornrimmed glasses were smiling. It was the cherubic countenance of J.N. Sahni, editor of the *National Call*, a newly-started nationalist daily from Delhi.

I had appeared for the B.A. examination and was now waiting in Delhi for the result to be announced. My father was running a Unani pharmacy—the Bara Dawakhana—and living in those days in a house near Ajmere Gate. This geographical accident made us a neighbour of the office of the *National Call*, and I was really tempted to try my luck in journalism, for which I considered myself fully qualified.

Between the *Hindustan Times* and the *National Call*, both of which claimed to be Congress papers, I had to make a choice—and I preferred the latter. The *Hindustan Times* was too closely allied to the capitalist-industrialist house of Birlas, while the *National Call* had a radical air about it. Between Pothan Joseph's column "Over a Cup of Tea" and J.N. Sahni's "From the Kutub Minar" there was a running feud going on, and I enjoyed the American-sounding flavour of Sahni's pen rather than the British wit and humour of Pothan Joseph. So I decided to try the *National Call* first.

My father was opposed to the career of a journalist—it was under-paid and too insecure, but he wouldn't oppose anything I really wanted to do. He persuaded me to do law, get the LL.B. degree from Aligarh, and then take to journalism. If the worst came to the worst, I could fall upon a legal career which, being his favourite elder brother's career, held a special fascination for my father.

I wrote a letter to Sahni Sahab and, on receiving his letter, went to see him, carrying two or three handwritten issues of the *Aligarh Mail* (or whatever its name was). Mr Sahni had recent-

ly returned from America and, despite his khadi *sherwani* and *churidar*, he definitely gave one a *Time-and-Life* impression. He read my handwritten papers with great interest.

I spent several hours studying the paper and writing my criticism of all the features—this headline was too “labellish,” that one could be improved, there were proof-reading mistakes in the editorial, and there was *no* “introduction” to the article on the editorial page. And so on. I had covered six foolscap pages in my handwriting which I presented to Sahni Saheb the next day. He scanned it with his practised editorial eye, then handed it back to me. “You can work as an unpaid apprentice during your holidays. Do you think you can work hard?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then for reporting, you will be under Sharma, our chief reporter. Sub-editing you will learn from Roy and Husain. . . .”

I asked, somewhat surprised, “What name did you say, Sir?”

“It is not *a* name—they are *two* names—Roy *and* Husain!”

“But your writing assignments you will receive from Basit Ansari. Do you think you can manage the three jobs?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then, good luck!” And he dismissed me and turned to a pile of papers on his table.

“Sir, I was hoping to learn from you. . . .”

“Learn what?”

“Journalism, Sir.”

“The first thing to learn about journalism is not to call anyone *Sir*—not even the editor! The second thing I can tell you.”

I waited for the oracle to speak while he filled and lighted his pipe.

“Whatever you write, give it a heading that should be interesting and provocative enough to induce the reader to read at least the first line. Write the first line so as to interest and provoke the reader to read at least the first paragraph. Write the first paragraph so as to induce the reader to go through the whole article. That will be possible if the first paragraph contains the summary of the article and yet retains something which will be divulged only after one has read the last paragraph of the article. That’s all.”

By the time I left his office, he was already going through his pile of papers.

Basit Ansari (who, I came to know, was a nephew of Doctor Ansari who happened to be a friend of my father) was the grey-haired assistant editor.

He read the criticism which I had written, then tore it to shreds. "Now, forget it. If someone sees it, you will make many enemies in this office."

From the next day I began my daily grind of twelve hours non-stop.

The day began at 8 a.m. I was supposed to cycle to all important hospitals—there were four of them in Delhi and New Delhi—and at least four police stations, on the off-chance of getting some news of an accident or casualty. Within a week I knew all the people and they learnt to recognize the tinkle of my cycle bell. I would not even descend from the cycle, would place my foot on the boundary wall, and someone would shout at me "*Sab theek hai. Koi khabar naheen!*" (All is well. There is no news!) When there was news, they would declare "*Ek (or do or teen) case hai.*" (There is one case—or two or three!). I would alight from my cycle only if there was a case to report, otherwise I would shout "Thanks!" and be pedelling on my way.

At ten or ten thirty I would be presenting the result of my peregrinations to M C. Sharma, the fast-talking but amiable chief reporter, who always had a cigar in his mouth. He would tell me how many lines each death or injury deserved in the paper. Then I would sit down and write those many lines and submit them to the chief reporter. He would reward me with tea and toast—and the inevitable mutton *kabab*—which he would order, one of each for himself and me, from the *baday miyan*, the white-bearded Muslim owner of the canteen.

By eleven thirty I presented myself to Roy and Husain—the inseparable sub-editors who were both Bengali though Husain could speak some words of broken Urdu. To start with, they gave me, the sheaf of local news—all the associations, organizations, *anjumans*, *samitis* and *sansthas*, that were holding their functions on the following day, and which they wanted to be mentioned in the news columns. Their instructions were to reduce each item to two or three lines—not more than twenty

words, they always said! Slowly, they acquired sufficient confidence in their unpaid apprentice to pass on to him, for sub-editing, some district news which came by mail. (By the time I went back to the university, I was handling the sub-editing of cabled news!) By three o'clock, I would share a cup of tea, pieces of toast and the inevitable *kabab* with Roy and Husain, or would share a vegetarian meal with Mr Menon, the news editor, who took a paternal interest in my welfare. Then I would be ready to transfer myself to the nextdoor cabin of Basit Ansari.

This was the work which I enjoyed doing the most. First there was the special article which appeared on the edit page. I had to sub-edit it, give it cross headings, and then write a three-paragraph introduction which gave a summary of the article but (following the instructions of my editor) held back the end.

I would write a dozen paragraphs for the *Tete A' Tete* column which were really sparklers—brief but pungent remarks bringing out the oddity, the absurdity or the folly of the officials' and the pro-British politicians' pronouncements. Out of these I would be lucky if Basit Saheb included one or two in his column.

Then I would write one or two items of comments on current topics—and generally one such item, after corrections, would be put in the paper. But I was all the time aiming high at the first editorial—and at last one day, towards the end of my three months, I would get that chance when Basit Saheb had to write on "Youth's Problems"—and got a nineteen-year old apprentice to write it!

In the evening, the morning round of the hospitals and police stations was repeated, and it was after 8 p.m., having delivered any news story that I might have come across, that I went home—deliciously tired!

I don't know how Sahni Saheb did it—it was certainly the scoop of the year and the decade—but he somehow got Jawaharlal Nehru's *Whither India*, a long article, which would raise inconvenient questions of ideology and practical politics that, forty-two years later, would still haunt the conscience of the nation. Jawaharlal had just come out of jail.

It was the first time that any important leader of the national

movement had used the Marxist phrases like “capitalism” and “proletariat,” “magic and religion” and “the inherent and fundamental conflict between economic interests within the nation. . . between landlord and tenant, or capitalist and wage labourer.”

I can say that, next to J.N. Sahni and Basit Ansari, I was the third man who read this “manifesto of socialism,” for it was my privilege to sub-edit it and to give it cross-headings and headlines. It concretized in stirring words what I and, indeed, my whole generation had vaguely thought and felt—but could not articulate.

“Our politics,” he had written, “must either be those of magic or of Science. . . . I have no faith in or use for the ways of magic and religion, and I can only consider the question on scientific grounds.”

“Again,” he had said, “whose freedom are we particularly striving for, for nationalism covers many sins and includes many conflicting elements . . . A more vital conflict of interest arises between these possessing classes as a whole and the others; between the Haves and Have-nots. All this is obvious enough, but every effort is made to confuse the real issue by the holders of power, whether political or economic.”

It was thrilling in the extreme to read this in the raw, and to imagine the “young man on the white horse” (as we then called Jawaharlal) leading the proletariat to the promised land of socialism. Little did I realize then that Jawaharlal himself would never withdraw those words, backtrack on the implied pledges, but would find himself incapable of taking the country decisively in the direction of socialism, and that he would allow “the holders of power, political and economic,” to cling to the status quo.

Let me record here that that three months period in the *National Call* really made me into a journalist. We were a community apart—the Bengali twins, Roy and Husain, the bumptious Punjabi M.C. Sharma (whom I would meet again in Bombay editing his own financial paper), Basit Ansari who would join the *Bombay Chronicle* and whose *Tete A’ Tete* with its dry wit and humour would become such a delightful feature of the Bombay paper, and J.N. Sahni, rollypolly editor, patriot,

raconteur, wit and, later, author of two huge volumes of reminiscences. But the *National Call* would change hands and be merged in Seth Goenka's *Indian Express* empire. While it lasted, it was a spearhead of patriotic thought and sentiments, not only preaching national integration much before the phrase became fashionable but demonstrating its wisdom and viability by creating unity out of the diversity of its staff. Hindu and Muslim, Bengali and Punjabi and Keralite, one and all drank water from the same glasses, drank tea from the same cups, and ate the toast and *kababs* which the old bearded Muslim prepared out of buffalo meat! We did not think of the long hours of work, low wages (I received none to be dissatisfied), congested, un-airconditioned office space, and the rusty bicycle on which I pedalled more than twenty miles per day—for we had a feeling that we were working to make the day of Indian freedom come nearer.

At last the result was out. I had passed the B.A. examination in the first class, but I was not happy. For, according to the compact with my father, I would have to go back to Aligarh to spend two years there doing law which I had no intention of practicing. I thought it was a waste of two years of a young man's life—after all the average age of an Indian was twenty-six years! But little did I know that I would be completing my autobiography in my sixty-first year, and hoping to present one of the first copies to Sahni Saheb.

11. Breakfast with the Vice-Chancellor

When I returned to Aligarh in October 1933, took admission in the Law College and started attending evening law classes, I had several friends to keep me company and to call out my attendance by proxy.

Among them there was Azhar, my cousin and brother-in-law Azhar Abbas (who had recently married my sister); Mohsin Abdullah, a good sportsman and ace hockey player; Mohamid Afzal who was from East Bengal; Abdul Raoof Siddiqi (who has just retired from the U.P. civil service, having been secretary of many departments); and Feroze Nana, a chubby young man from Sind (who has recently retired from the Pakistan judicial service, having been a high court judge). Azhar and Mohsin had rejoined the university after spending a year trying for the civil service examination.

Unlike me, they were all very keen on a legal career and took the course very seriously.

Among the friends who were not in LL.B. there was Nafis Ahmed who was taking his geography M.A. very seriously, and Ansar Harvani who was still in B.A. though he hobnobbed with us.

Ansar had become a recognized orator in Urdu and once took me to the Jame Masjid in the city to attend Friday prayers. After the prayers were over, his speech was announced, and he made a fiery anti-British speech—but from a Muslim point of view. In content and oratorical tricks, it was no different from a speech made by a Maulana of the anti-British Jamiatul-Ulema.

Ansar had a consistently patriotic career in politics. He was one of the founders of the Students Federation, a stalwart of the Youth Congress, he has all along been a member of the Congress, was several times jailed, was underground as a forward blockist follower of Subhas Bose, he stayed with me in

1942 and 1943 in Bombay and was eating in six-annas-a-plate restaurants when he had enormous amounts to deliver to revolutionary leaders in different parts of the country. After independence he stood thrice for Parliament on a Congress ticket—and twice he won, defeating the Jana Sangh as well as the Muslim League candidates. Much lesser men became Ministers, he was never offered even a deputy ministership. But he never lost touch with the Muslim masses. For the last several years he has been one of the secretaries of the Citizens Welfare Committee, and it was his brainwave to send copies of the Holy Quran to Pakistani prisoners of war from Bangladesh—a gesture which, with all their anti-Indian prejudices, they could not but appreciate. After the Simla Agreement, they went back reverently carrying the “presented-by-Kafirs” Quran on their heads or slung over their chests!

To get back to the problem of what I was to do with my days, I thought of a printed student paper—independent of the college magazine which had to be censored by a professor appointed by the British pro-vice-chancellor. Exciting things continued to happen in the country. Congress leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were continuously in and out of the prison, and it was imperative that the students got to know their views. Communalism, too, was rampant—specially in Aligarh and Benaras—and had to be fought. Various stooges of the British government were making frequent visits to the university and delivering speeches and influencing students by raising the cry of “Islam in danger” and dangling before them the carrot of government jobs and offices. All this needed an independent paper with national and rational views which would try to save the students from unhealthy influences.

Therefore, I went to the proprietor of a small press which was situated midway between the university and the town and asked for a quotation. He said he would charge for a four-page treadle-sized paper—five hundred copies, printing and paper combined—hold your contemporary breath—twelve rupees and annas eight only. So I calculated five hundred copies, paid for at the rate of half an anna, came to more than fifteen rupees,

and found it a bargain even if four hundred and fifty copies were sold!

So I called a committee of five friends—each of whom was to be a shareholder with a share-capital of fifteen rupees divided into six shares of two and a half rupees each.

Then I had to give a declaration as editor, printer and publisher of the *Aligarh Opinion*, and within a month India's first university students' weekly was launched.

I wrote the bulk of the paper, with the help of some friends (mostly among the "proprietors" of the paper), then cycled to the press and gave the matter for composing, next day I went there to correct the proofs, and the third day to collect the copies after they had been printed on the hand-and-foot-operated treadle machine. Once when the old machine man was ill, I had to operate the treadle myself and, when I was absent-mindedly thinking of something else, my hand was caught in the treadle machine and was slightly crushed—my foot coming off the treadle when the pressure was felt on the hand. I still carry a fading scar on the back of my left hand. The only physical injury of my journalistic career.

The paper was supposed to be out on Sunday morning, and the "delivery boys"—i.e., ourselves, the editor and the proprietors—would fan out on cycles, each delivering roughly hundred copies. The money was collected promptly and handed over to Khwaja Mehboob Ali, my cousin, who was manager of the paper.

The editor, printer, and publisher of the *Aligarh Opinion* never forgot that he was also the correspondent of the *National Call* and the *Bombay Chronicle*. They had to be fed with appropriate news—if there was no appropriate news, we still supplied it! No, we did not *invent* or concoct the news. We only "manufactured" it. We had no telegraphic authority, so sometimes we sent the news in advance, then enacted it, according to what would appear in the papers, keeping our fingers crossed there was no mishap.

For instance once Sir Mohamed Yaqoob of Moradabad was supposed to come and deliver a speech in the Union. The topic of the lecture was the White Paper issued by the British government on constitutional reforms to be introduced in the country—

a document which nationalist opinion had rejected and denounced. We were warned in advance that no other speeches would be allowed but, on our insistence, the student vice-president agreed that three questions will be allowed to be put to the speaker after his speech—one of which was assigned to our group. I was asked by my friends to frame the question in such a way as to make a speech unnecessary.

When the time came, the hall was packed to hear Sir Mohamed Yaqoob who was fat and ill at ease in a suit that was at least one size too small for him. After he had been officially introduced by the vice-president, as he rose to speak, the whole row occupied by us yawned in mischievous unison. He looked in our direction, then went on with his oration. We interrupted his speech about half a dozen times with audible yawns, snores, and once or twice by mock shouts of "Hear, hear!" to which he could hardly take objection though he looked ill at ease every time we raised our voices. After he sat down, he mopped his brow and drank a full glass of water.

Then came the questions.

The first questioner was asking him for some clarification which he was glad to reply, expansively.

The second question was deliberately planted by the communalists. The same shortish fellow who had once complimented me for exposing the wily *banya* Gandhi, was on his feet asking specifically what should the Muslim reaction be to the White Paper, to which Sir Mohamed was also glad to reply. In fact, he congratulated the framer of the question to have thought *as a Muslim*. The White Paper, according to the speaker, should be welcomed by all Muslims, for it safeguarded their rights and saw to it that they were not engulfed by the rising tide of *Hindu* nationalism.

I had by then managed to sneak forward to the front benches and I raised my hand, anxious not to miss the bus. To my great relief the vice-president (according to, our understanding) immediately recognized me.

"Mr Abbas will now ask the third—and the final—question. But I warn him that it should be a one sentence question and not a speech. Do you agree, Mr Abbas?"

"Yes, Sir," I replied getting up.

Sir Mohamed Yaqoob looked at me with kind condescension.

I began and said something to this effect. "Will Sir Mohamed Yaqoob inform his British masters that the students of the Aligarh Muslim University think of the White Paper proposals presented by them as totally unacceptable to Indians, firstly, because the demand for complete independence has not been conceded;" . . .

"Is that all?" The vice-president who was feeling hot under the collar got up and asked me. "You agreed to a one sentence question."

"No, Sir. My sentence is just beginning. After the last word 'conceded' there is no full stop, only a semi-colon."

"All right, go on." The vice-president warned me. "But mind you, after the first full stop, your question comes to an end. Go on."

I continued. ". . . secondly, because the substance of socialism as outlined in the resolution of the Karachi Congress has not been conceded semi-colon thirdly. . ." and so my question went on and on, putting semi-colons after every sentence and then beginning again—fourthly, fifthly—till I had knocked a dozen holes in the White Paper. Only then I said, ". . . and, finally, let him tell his British masters that the students of the Aligarh University think this of their precious White Paper. . ." and I dramatically drew an authentic copy of the White Paper from my pocket and dramatically tore it to bits "that it should be torn to bits and flung in the face of its supporters" and I actually did it, and then said "question mark. Full stop."

For a moment every one, including the Knight of the British Empire, was too much taken aback by the turn of events for any reaction. Then our supporters clapped and, surprisingly enough, the mass of the students who always appreciated audacity on the part of a student, whatever the cause, joined in the applause.

The vice-president, who had instinctively joined the applause, realized his mistake too late and stood up to thank the speaker who was apoplectic with rage and remained grimly silent.

As soon as the meeting ended, we rushed to the station on our bicycles. We waited for the midnight Delhi train to arrive,

and when the dak editions of the Delhi papers were opened, we were there to buy the first six copies. By morning every one would read it.

We did not have to even open the paper to search for the news. It was there on the front page under a photo-block of Sir Mohamed Yaqoob: "WHITE PAPER TORN IN ALIGARH UNIV. MEETING—Should be Flung in the Face of His Apologists, says Student Leader—"

This is what I meant by "manufacturing" news according to the reports already supplied to newspapers. But it was a dangerous trick that could not be repeated too often. Suppose the meeting itself had been postponed for any reason?

Any way, we managed to drop one copy of the paper in the room of Sir Mohamed Yaqoob who was staying in the dak bungalow. When we enquired there at breakfast time, we learnt that, immediately after reading the paper, Sir Mohamed Yaqoob had left Aligarh by car for Moradabad. He did not address any other meeting at the university during the two years that I was there.

The news was further elaborated, perhaps also embellished, in the report that was published by the *Aligarh Opinion*.

And that led to a more serious development.

The British pro-vice-chancellor—his name, funnily enough, was Ramsbottom—read the report and called for me.

I knew the time had come for me to say goodbye the university.

"What is this?" He produced the paper dramatically.

"It is the *Aligarh Opinion*, Sir." I replied, using all my powers of self-control (which were, and are, not much). I would have cried in the presence of anyone else, but I was not prepared to show my weakness before an Englishman.

"Who allowed you to bring out this—this—paper?" he demanded.

I told him I had not taken anyone's permission. "Moreover, it is not necessary."

"Do you know you can be prosecuted for publishing it?" he asked me in a sarcastic tone.

"For printing the truth, Sir?" I asked naively enough. "You can ask anyone who was present at the meeting."

"I can turn you out of the university!" he threatened me.

But that is exactly what I wanted. Then my father could not force me to continue with my law studies and I could go to Bombay and join the *Bombay Chronicle*, and, if possible and necessary, go to jail as a satyagrahi.

"I would welcome it, Sir, and thank you for rustivating me—for I want to be a nationalist journalist—and what better introduction for me than to have been turned out of a university by a British pro-vice-chancellor?"

The grandson of Sir Syed, and the son of Justice Mehmood, he was taller than six feet and had the physique of an athlete. Impeccably, though not necessarily richly dressed, he had the air of a diplomat or a man-about-town. He wore suits and *sherwanis* with equal sartorial success. He lived (to me it seemed) like an English lord and his house was filled with books and artistic bric a brac. He had travelled widely and collected items of interest with good taste rather than with good money.

He was dressed in grey slacks and navy blue blazer with the faded crest of Cambridge (Oxford) College, with a college tie to match, as he got up to his full height to receive me—who looked like Ceylon under India! Shaking hands warmly with me, he said he was glad to welcome the great-grandson of Hali, a dear friend of his grandfather, and insisted that I must have breakfast with him—but he was waiting for a friend who was a house guest to join them. He asked me to sit down on a sofa and went to call his friend.

I looked about and recalled the many stories about Sir Ross Masood and his father, Justice Mehmood, which I had heard. Sir Ross Masood was one of those contrary persons who dressed in India in English suits but affected Indian dress when he was in a European country or expecting European company. Once, it appears, he was on a P. and O. liner and promenading the deck in Lucknow *chikan kurta*, duly embroidered, and a loose pajama. An Englishman, maybe an official from India, disdainfully looked at this native attire and snobbishly asked, "Sir Ross, can you tell me the difference between Eastern and Western culture?"

"Certainly," said Ross Mosood, pausing near him for a minute, "The difference is that while you in the West put your shirt inside the trousers, we keep it outside." Then, as he turned to continue his walk, he added, "More than that you

won't understand!"

There was another story about him.

Once while returning from Nainital, he had to change trains at Bareilly. He had just got down from his coupe dressed in his favourite *kurta* pajama and, telling his servant to put the luggage in a first class compartment, he sauntered away to the refreshment room.

A red faced colonel, with a huge bulldog, got into the first class compartment, and finding it blocked by a good deal of luggage, asked the servant whose it was. The servant pointed to his master who was just entering the refreshment room.

The haughty colonel, finding a mere "native" in native dress, asked his bearer to throw out the luggage. Despite the feeble protests of Ross Masood's servant, the luggage was thrown out on the platform where Ross Masood found it.

"What happened?" he asked.

The servant explained that the colonel saheb had commandeered the compartment for himself and his dog.

Ross Masood told the servant to put back the luggage and then entered the compartment. The colonel was sprawled on one berth while the other was occupied by his dog.

Ross Masood sniffed the air in the compartment, then he said, "You and your dog—I don't know whose smell I find more objectionable. I can suffer an Englishman—or I can suffer the dog. But I can't suffer both of you. One of you has to get out!"

The red faced colonel became redder and got up threateningly to fight.

Ross Masood took a boxer's stance and said in the most Oxonian accent, "Let me warn you, man. I was boxing champion at Oxford!"

The colonel was punctured and apologized, and made way for Ross Masood to occupy the berth with him

My reverie was broken by the tall vice-chancellor entering with an equally tall middle-aged man—obviously a foreigner.

"Abbas, meet Louis Bromfield, the famous American author. Louis, this is Ahmad Abbas whose weekly paper you have been reading."

"Hello, Mr Bromfield," I said shaking his hand—his grip was firm but friendly.

"Come on, let's have breakfast," said Ross Masood and led us to the dining table which was laid for three persons.

I tried to be formal and said, "Sir, I have had breakfast at home!"

Ross Masood brushed my objection aside, "Nonsense, when I was your age I could eat three breakfasts."

Meanwhile, I was trying to remember when, and in what connection, I had read Mr Bromfield's name. Yes, it was in a Delhi paper that the American novelist was in India to collect material for his books.

"Abbas," Ross Masood said, "Mr Bromfield is here absorbing Indian local colour for his next novel and he wants to meet some really interesting and wide-awake students. He has already read your paper and wanted to meet you."

I said I would be glad to arrange a meeting of Mr Bromfield with my friends.

"By the way, Abbas, you won't get rid of the university so easily! Your father wants you to do law, and that's what you are going to do!"

"You mean I can continue with the *Aligarh Opinion*?"

"You can—on one condition."

"What's that?" I feared some impossible condition.

"The condition is—" and he paused to create suspense "that you will supply a free copy to me every week."

And both of them burst out laughing, and I joined them. After that I attacked the plate of porridge and milk with revived appetite.

It was Christmas vacation and I was in Panipat, staying at my ancestral house, when I noticed that every time I went out anywhere, a nondescript man in khaki shirt and dirty white pajama would follow me. First I thought it was only my imagination—he must be some neighbour who had to go the same way. But the man persisted. Then I asked him.

"Brother, why are you following me?"

"*Ji, janaab*, I am just going on my way."

"No, I have been noticing it for the last several days. You are following me! I want to know: on whose instructions? And why?"

"I don't know, Sir. The higher-ups would know these things. I am a poor man. Don't get me in trouble, please." He was pleading with me now.

"How much higher-up? The local sub-inspector?"

"No, Sir. The instructions have come from Karnal." It was the district headquarters.

"You mean the superintendent of police or the deputy commissioner?"

"The D.C. Saheb. But, Sir, please don't say that I told you."

The next day being Sunday, my father came for the weekend from Delhi, and I reported the matter to him. He suggested that I go to Karnal and meet the deputy commissioner.

I sent in my card and the deputy commissioner—a pleasant-looking young Englishman—called me in and beckoned me to sit down.

"Yes, Mr Abbas," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"I should like to know why I am being followed by a man from the C.I.D."

He said, "Oh, it's that!"—and looked through some files on the table.

"I am sorry if you have been bothered," he said, "I hope the fellow has not inconvenienced you!"

"Well, it is only that I don't like being followed—someone breathing down my back all the time. At least I should know why all this attention is being paid to me."

"Have you been writing letters to Jawaharlal Nehru?" he asked.

"Yes. Is that a crime?" I asked. Now I knew why so many letters were not reaching him.

He again looked at the papers in the file, "No. No. But it appears that you have been expressing rather dangerous ideas."

"Where?" I asked, peeved, "In the letters?"

"Yes. But also in your union debates. That is more dangerous."

I asked him by name (now I have forgotten it), "Have you heard of Oxford?"

"Yes, he smiled, "though I am a Cambridge man."

"Well, Oxford or Cambridge, don't you have radical-minded

young men expressing all kinds of ideas in union debates there? Does the British government follow every one who expresses what you call 'dangerous thoughts'?"

"No, they don't—but are you a communist?"

"I have not yet made up my mind," I replied. "As a matter of fact the communists in the university think I am an incorrigible *petite bourgeoisie*."

He said something quite irrelevant in reply, "Will you have tea, Mr Abbas?"

"I won't mind." And he rang the bell and when the liveried peon came in, he ordered two teas.

"Does it mean I will not be followed?" I asked, and he said, "We'll see. But first let's have some tea."

The C.I.D. surveillance was withdrawn in Panipat, but the U.P. government, and the central government, were not so easily convinced of my harmlessness.

The university historical society that year planned a trip to Afghanistan to study the historical sites in that country which had definite cultural links with India. I was an ex-secretary of the society and was entitled to join in the group. In fact I planned the whole trip. Ansar was also included. And I sent off the applications for passports—and in due course, the passports arrived. All except one. Mine! "There will be some delay in issuing Mr Abbas's passport," the authorities had said. I knew that it would not be issued. But, since the professor-incharge who was accompanying the twenty boys insisted, I agreed to go up to Peshawar and stay there for a week, hoping that by that time the authorities would send it.

We all went by train to Peshawar, and stayed at Yahya Khan's house, who was the vice-president of the university union. His younger brother, Mohamed Yunus, was a friend of mine and Ansar. Though he was junior to both of us, politics drew us together. When the party went by bus I and Yunus accompanied them through the Khyber Pass right up to the Afghanistan border through the no man's land, which even British army convoys would not dare to traverse after sunset. All around were the gaunt and bare hills which were the territory of the free tribes.

As the bus went on its way, raising a cloud of dust, we

were left there at the checkpoint to travel back to Peshawar. For a week I enjoyed the proverbial Pathan hospitality of Yunus and his brother Yahya Khan in Peshawar, and later in Murree. After a week I came back to Peshawar. No passport had arrived. I had known all along that it would not come.

Thirty-two years later, when I met Mohamed Yunus in San Francisco (he was then consul-general there) I stayed with him once again. Now his son was as old as Yunus was in 1934.

Recalling the old days, I asked Yunus why the British government had not given me a passport in 1934 to go to Afghanistan.

"Didn't you guess?" replied Yunus, with diplomatic flourish, "At that time the nearest Soviet embassy was in Kabul and you might have sneaked out to the USSR!"

12. My Long Love Affair—1

The very first time I saw Jawaharlal Nehru was love at first sight.

I was in the local tin shed called the Bansal Cinema, and he was on the screen in a newsreel, several months after the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress.

The contrast with Gandhiji, with Vallabhbhai Patel, with Pandit Malaviya, with Babu Rajendra Prasad, with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, even with Subhas Chandra Bose (resplendent in the theatrical uniform of the general commanding officer of the Congress volunteers) was so pleasantly startling that I sat up as the slim young man came riding on a white horse. This, I said to myself quite irrationally, is my leader, my comrade, my beloved. In the darkness of the cinema, I was not holding hands with a girl (there was no chance of that) but even if I had, I would have released my paw from her dainty grip to join in the applause, as the hero of my novel *Inqilab* does under similar circumstances.

But I was not merely attracted to the personality, since I was already fascinated by the new youthful language of dynamism that the general secretary of the Congress spoke, while opposing the resolution on dominion status, at Calcutta. "You will not get independence by logic and fine phrases. You will get it when they feel that it will be hell for them in India unless they agree to it." But his smart, youthful good looks had something to do with it, and the fact that he was not carried about in a bullock cart or on top of an elephant, like the other pompous or debilitated Congress leaders, but went about riding a horse appealed to a fifteen-year old boy and other boys slightly older.

His presidential address delivered at the Lahore Congress Session, later printed as a separate booklet, was our Bible and we knew many passages from it by heart. "We stand, therefore, today for the fullest freedom of India. This Congress has not

acknowledged and will not acknowledge the right of the British Parliament to dictate to us in any way. To it we make no appeal. But we do appeal to the Parliaments and consciences of the world and to them we shall demonstrate, I hope, that India submits no longer to any foreign domination. . . . Let no one, least of all England, mistake or under-rate the meaning and the strength of our resolve."

The presidential address was not only a challenge to imperialism but to its allies—the Indian capitalists and the absentee landlords. "We have to decide for whose benefit industry must be run and the land produce food. Today the abundance that the land produces is not for the peasant or the labourer who work on it; and industry's chief function is to produce millionaires. . . the mud huts and hovels and the nakedness of our people testify to the glory of the British Empire and to our present social system!"

Or "Socialism cannot thrive in a society based on acquisitiveness. It becomes necessary to change the basis of the acquisitive society and remove the profit motive."

This was the man who had unfurled the flag of complete independence on the banks of the Ravi—there was romance and adventure in him and his words—and the whole generation of young Indians loved this "young man on a white horse." We all loved him madly—but there was a method in our madness.

I have already written about the privilege I had of sub-editing the *Whither India* series of articles. Since then I had begun to look at Jawaharlal Nehru with a proprietorial air, as if I owned him. That is the feeling that, I am now sure, these articles induced in hundreds of thousands of young men—and young women, too—who read them in newspapers or, later, in book form. For had he not articulated what we had only vaguely felt?

It was in that frame of mind that one midnight, while walking up and down at Aligarh railway station, we discovered that Jawaharlal was passing through Aligarh the next morning by Calcutta Mail on the way to Allahabad from Delhi. That night there were only four of us—Nafis Ahmad whom I have already described, Sibtay Hasan (one of the "Russians" or communists, who is now in Karachi, Pakistan, propagating communism through literature, and Ansar and myself. A reception was being

arranged by the local Congress Committee. Someone suggested that we go to Khurja, one station before Aligarh, where the crowd was expected to be much smaller, and there get into the train with Panditji and travel with him up to Aligarh and ask him the many questions that we were dying to ask him.

We took a slow train to Khurja and arrived there at about five in the morning. We had to wait for the Delhi train for more than three hours and spent the time imbibing cups of tea and rehearsing the questions that we would ask him.

It was winter and by 9-30 a.m. we could see a cluster of Gandhi caps on the platform, with the national tricolour in their hands. We managed to be in their midst and nearest to the edge of the platform.

The train arrived on time and the small crowd surged forward, almost throwing us under the wheels. Jawaharlal was (to our disappointment) in a first class compartment, and his companions were Dr Syed Mahmood and his secretary, Upadhyaji. Garlanding by the local Congress chief followed, "*Jawaharlalji ki Jai*," "*Doctor Mahmood ki Jai*" was shouted a couple of times rather perfunctorily, and soon the guard was blowing his whistle. At the last moment we managed to get into the compartment.

Now, at last, as he turned away from the window and asked us to sit down, I was face to face with my idol and my ideal, the man I loved and (at that moment) the man I hated for travelling first class like one of those bloodsucking bourgeoisie exploiters.

Looking at our black *sherwanis* with the university crest on the collar, he said, "So you are from Aligarh. What are you doing in Khurja?"

Ansar managed to say, "Panditji, we came to see you."

"*Mahmood, suna toomne?*" Jawahar turned to Dr Mahmood, "even Aligarh students have run away from the university to see us!"

Dr Mahmood silently smiled but didn't say anything.

The train was now running fast, jerking and jolting us as we sat, two on the seat opposite and one—I—on the same berth as Jawaharlal.

Still I had not asked a single question, I was just fascinatedly watching the handsome features, the patrician face, the aquiline

nose. I found, to my shock, that he was not tall as he looked in his photographs. At last I blurted out the one question which had pushed out of my mind all other questions that I and my companions had rehearsed during the night. "Panditji, why are you travelling first class?" Even my two companions, including a revolutionary Marxist, looked askance at my affrontery. But the Nehru temper was not aroused by it. He only smiled and looked at his two companions.

"Because," he said at last, "we could not get any other accomodation in the train—and also we wanted to be by ourselves—we had to discuss so many things."

I was not convinced but it seemed to be a plausible enough explanation. Gandhiji, whom we had glimpsed from afar, made a point of travelling third class—that was why he was nearer the masses.

He must have been a mind reader, too, for he asked me, "Are you thinking of Mahatmaji?"

I nodded my head in the affirmative.

"I couldn't hope to compete with the Mahatma. I suppose I am too much of a petite bourgeoisie yet. I have not yet sufficiently de-classed myself."

That forthright confession about being a petite bourgeoisie as yet unable to de-class himself was better. At least he was speaking the language of revolution.

Again silence in the compartment, as the train ate up the distance.

Clackety-clack. Clackety-clack! Clackety-clack! The wheels seemed to be singing the song of the revolution.

Revolution! Revolution! Revolution! Revolution!

Jawaharlal was scribbling something in his little red diary.

I noted the colour of revolution, and was satisfied. At last the question was shot out of my mouth.

"Panditji, how can we help to bring revolution in our country?"

He put back the little red book in his pocket and then said, "By first bringing about a revolution in your minds."

"How can we do that—I mean bring about a revolution in our minds, Panditji?" It was Sibtay Hasan's turn to ask.

Panditji pondered the reply before giving it. Dr Mahmood looked away from the book he was reading. We all thought

that Panditji would give us the example of the Russian revolution or the Irish revolution, commend their methods, or perhaps he would tell us to read some books—Karl Marx's *Capital*, or the *Life of Lenin*, or perhaps *My Experiments with Truth* by Mahatma Gandhi. But we were not prepared for the reply he gave us.

“By insisting on asking questions.”

We looked at each other. What kind of reply was this to our earth-shaking question?

Again that charming, enigmatic smile, “Never believe anything—whether it comes from your father, grandfather, from your teacher or professor, from a leader, from a Pandit or—” he gave a mocking, mischievous look to Dr Mahmood—“—a doctor—unless you have become convinced of it. Ask questions but specially: What? Why? Where? When?”

Now his idea was becoming clearer. He was asking us to be questioners, non-believers, sceptics, heretics. But it was a philosophical, rather than a revolutionary, attitude.

The train jerked violently as it changed tracks near a station where it was not stopping.

He also seemed to change tracks.

“What are your subjects?”

We told them—history was the one thing we were all studying.

“Don't merely read history. Observe history in the making. Do you have some villages in and around your university?”

We told him about the villages, some of which were only a mile away from the university.

“Go there—ask questions of the villagers—whose land are they tilling? What does he do? What are they doing? How much share does he take away at the time of each harvest? What remains for the tillers? And you would begin to understand the basic facts about the history of feudal exploitation in India! And don't let anyone tell you that it is the will of God that the peasants should be poor, and the landlords should be rich.”

The train was now racing through the outskirts of Aligarh, so I took an autograph book and presented it to Panditji. He scribbled something, and handed it back to me.

I was about to present it to Doctor Mahmood when I found

the train was slowing down at the Aligarh station and the platform was overflowing with people among whom we could spot hundreds of black *sherwanis* worn by students.

"You will never be able to get out this way," Jawaharlal said, pointing to the surging crowd, as the train slowed down, and suggested the other exit.

We thanked him for his courtesy, shook hands with him, and as I was shaking hands, I thanked him for his kindness in replying to my letters.

"So you are one of those people!" he said, and it was difficult to say whether he meant it as a mark of approbation or only meant to mock me. "What is your name?"

I told him, but it was difficult for him to hear it in all that hubbub and shouts of "*Jawaharlal Nehru ki Jai*," "*Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Zindabad*" and "*Inqilab Zindabad!*"

The next moment we were getting down from the wrong side of the platform, where a goods train was standing on a parallel track. We were seen off by Jawaharlal Nehru standing in the open door-way, oblivious to all the "*Jais*" being shouted from the other side.

As we crossed the railway line, I looked back. He was still there in the doorway—waving at us with an indulgent smile.

Now, at last, I opened the autograph book, and all of us read: "*Live dangerously. Jawaharlal Nehru.*"

From the age of fifteen, for several years now, I had taken to writing occasional letters to Jawaharlal Nehru—when he was general secretary and when he was President of the Congress—and, quite unexpectedly, he had replied to many of them. All these letters, neatly filed in a precious file, along with copies of my original letters, have been lost in my Panipat archives.

Last year one of the editors of Jawaharlal Nehru's *Collected Works* sent me the copy of one of his letters and asked me to confirm whether it was, indeed, written to me. It was like discovering a long-lost love letter and I hurriedly replied in the affirmative, and asked for a copy of the original in reply to which it had been written.

Here is the letter that I sent him on 7 March 1931, when I was less than seventeen years old and hence the gushing (if self-conscious) admiration and sentimentality:

My dear brother,

I hope you will not mind my calling you a brother, for since our short meeting in the train between Khurja and Aligarh, I have really begun to love you—as a younger brother does his elder brother.

Not only I but all of us, who were in the train with you, have been so impressed by your magnetic and charming personality that we are sure that the destiny of the nation is safe in your hands.

About the letter I wrote you to Delhi, I owe an apology. After I had posted it I realized that it was not proper on my part to give advice to my superiors. But I assure you that it was not because I have not full confidence in you and the other members of the Working Committee but because I realize that our enemies are masters of “diplomacy” (which in reality means treachery and falsehood) and feared lest they might take advantage of the truth and simplicity of Mahatmaji.

There are a few things which we wanted to ask you but owing to lack of time we couldn’t. The first and the foremost is “how do you propose to root out these parasitic and poisonous weeds—the Indian states and their rulers?” What is your personal opinion?

As the most important question *viz* of Hindu-Muslim unity is being discussed at Delhi, would it not have been better if you had stayed at Delhi and exerted your influence for bringing about a peaceful settlement?

Last year I had requested you to send me an autographed photo of yours (to inspire me every moment) and you had very kindly promised to send me one. But soon after you became a *guest* of H.M. the “King.” So, may I very respectfully remind you of your kind promise.

I know you have arduous national duties to perform and extremely important problems which will engage your attention, still I hope you will find a few moments to write a letter to one of your humblest admirers and followers.

Ever yours
respectfully,
Ahmad Abbas.

P.S. My respectful salams to Dr Mahmood.¹

And here is his reply as published in the fourth volume of the *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*²:

March 12, 1931

My dear Friend,

Thank you for your letter of the 7th. You owe me no apology for the letter you sent me to Delhi. I was quite pleased to read it. I like spirit in a young man and it delighted me to find that you were full of it. (What a compliment for a seventeen-year old student of the intermediate college!—K.A.A.). You are perfectly right in feeling that our opponents are masters in the art of diplomacy and they might mislead us.

I could not remain in Delhi for further discussions as I had to come back to Allahabad for certain ceremonies in connection with my father's death. I shall be back in Delhi in a few days time when I understand further talk on the question of Hindu-Muslim Unity will take place.

Regarding the Indian states and their rulers I have no doubt whatever in my mind that the rulers will have to go completely. (Hurrah! What a mighty boost to my antimonarchical propensities against these stooges of British imperialism!—K.A.A.) Whether it is possible to dispose of them soon or late depends on circumstances. (Must my idol and hero compromise on this? Why not *soon* rather than *late*?—K.A.A.)

I am sorry I have not got any photograph of mine at present which I can send you. When I have one, I shall do so.

Yours sincerely,
Jawaharlal Nehru.

It appears possible that I must have written a letter of youthful resentment against what appeared to a seventeen-year old hot head as the compromises in the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. My "friend" had written to say that he did not only not mind it, but that he

¹A.I.C.C. File No. 6-40 (KW) (ii)/1931 Pt. I, pp 105-106, N.M.M.L.

²*Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, a project of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, edited by S. Gopal, Orient Longman Ltd., New Delhi, Volume 4.

was pleased, for he liked "spirit in a young man." Oh, to be seventeen again and full of fire and spirit to bombard the person one admired most with one's questions and misgivings and doubts, and to get such an encouraging reply!

At last we succeeded in getting Jawaharlal Nehru to address the students in the university—but only indirectly through our efforts!

We didn't know Sir Ross Masood would turn the tables against us. We learnt too late that Jawaharlal would be addressing a meeting.

Jawaharlal came to the university as a guest of the Vice-chancellor, stayed with him as his houseguest, and addressed a meeting not in the cramped Union hall but in the much larger Strachey Hall under the presidency of Sir Ross Masood himself!

They both came out of the Vice-chancellor's car together, and the tall immaculate Sir Ross escorted Jawaharlal in and, amidst thunderous cheers, led him to the dais. Sir Ross had not only won the day, but isolated Jawaharlal Nehru completely from undesirables like myself in the university. I heard his speech from the last row in the hall.

But he was here—in our university—in our midst! After a formal welcome—in which Sir Ross Masood, speaking perfect Oxford English, mentioned Jawaharlal Nehru as the son of the great Motilal Nehru whose loss was deep in our memory, as a former brilliant student of Cambridge, as a symbol of our cultural synthesis and our unity-in-diversity, and only incidentally as a freedom-fighter and a Congress leader. Then he invited Jawaharlal Nehru to speak.

"Mr Vice-Chancellor and young men of the university," began Jawaharlal Nehru in English which he, too, could speak in a slightly affected Cambridge accent, and immediately established a rapport with every student. I felt he was speaking to me—and every one of the thousand and five hundred in the hall felt the same.

"You, Sir," with a courteous bow he had a fling at the tall and handsome Vice-chancellor, "have set up an example by addressing this house in English, and perforce I have to follow that example." Then he looked at us—at the students—and said, "I wanted to come here and meet you because I have

heard from childhood of what Aligarh has done and of the large place its products occupy in our national life."

He told us that he would communicate to us some of the ideas that have moved him in the past and move him still and said, "I am called a dreamer. I wish you were called dreamers, too, provided your dreams have some relation to reality. There are not many in the country who are endowed with such a gift." And he said something that sent the youth present into peals of laughter followed by an outburst of applause. "If youth will not dream, do you expect these crabbed and aged people to dream?"—with the slightest nod in the direction of the Vice-chancellor.

Then he asked the students to "read of what fascism is doing in Italy and Hitlerism in Germany" and for a contrast he mentioned "that most marvellous and unprecedented work in history—the unique and unparalleled economic reconstruction in the U.S.S.R." This was the first time any one had dared to speak so matter-of-factly about the Soviet Union.

"The world today is being moved by large forces, almost like an earthquake," he said, "*Your* country is engaged in a battle for freedom." Then he looked at us—at the students—at each one of us—and said, "Don't you think it is a cause that you should espouse? . . . Do you ever think in these universities of the starving and bare skeletons of our countrymen moved by the elemental force of hunger? Do you ever ask yourself the question—what has happened to them, and if they are going to remain starved and poor for ever? What is going to be your contribution in their struggle?"

And he ended on this challenging note, "Outside these walls, there is the real India, and if we do not march with the events, it is possible that real India may take things in its hands and march ahead of us."

Amidst thunderous applause from the blase and sophisticated and generally hostile Aligarhian he sat down, while a student began a rigmarole of a vote of thanks.

We tramped the railway platform far into the night, discussing the unexpected turn of events. Did the Vice-chancellor know about our letters to Jawaharlal? And what did he mean by coming there and monopolizing him as the dear, dear son of his late friend? He was surely hoping thus to clip his wings,

smother him with caresses! But Jawaharlal Nehru had stubbornly refused to be patronized. He had spoken, straight from the shoulder, and called a spade a spade. (I was phrase-conscious, even then.)

Jawaharlal Nehru had come and gone, but his speech had churned up the stagnant waters of university life. He had confronted us with our responsibility—responsibility to our country, responsibility to our people, and responsibility to history. Would the speech affect our lives, our modes of life, our ways of thinking? Or would it be forgotten as another lecture delivered, heard and forgotten? For some of us, I knew, it would be much more than that.

13. Bombay and the Brave Air of Socialism!

Bombay!

I and Ansar Harvani sat by the window of the third class compartment of the Frontier Mail as it thundered towards Bombay. It was an early July morning, and we wanted to have the thrill of our first glimpse of Bombay about which we had heard so much, read so much in novels and short stories.

Chowpatty.

Malabar Hill.

Hanging Gardens.

Bhendi Bazar.

Crawford Market.

Ballard Pier.

And beyond that, the sea! The sea!!

As the train thundered past the local station platforms, there were dark clouds on the horizon. It was raining somewhere. Excitement piled upon excitement as we recognized, from hearsay, some of the suburban stations—Andheri, Bandra, Dadar, separated by thick vegetation that would give place one day to a concrete jungle. Its population was still only a little more than half a million—*only* would be added only in retrospect! In 1934 half a million was not *only*; it was five lakhs, the second largest city in India!

The excitement of arriving in Bombay has not abated with the years. I would come to Bombay several times every year—I would come by different trains in different compartments—by the Frontier Mail and the Punjab Mail, I would be travelling by third class, by airconditioned third class and by airconditioned first class, by second class, by inter class. I would be getting down at Bombay Central and at Victoria Terminus, at Byculla and at Dadar. Or I would be flying down to Santa Cruz airport. But the excitement of coming to Bombay would be always the same. Bombay, it has been said, is not a city, it

is a state of mind. It is a state of a young man's mind, exciting and excitable, exuberant and effervescent, dynamic and dramatic.

The biggest city we had seen before was Delhi—and Bombay was infinitely bigger. The proportion has always roughly been the same. When the population of Delhi would be half a million, Bombay would be more than a million; when Delhi would be more than two millions; Bombay would have crossed the five million mark. So the excitement of coming into Bombay would remain the same.

We got down at Bombay Central, with our two tin trunks and bedding rolls, and we took the horse-carriage called a *victoria* to reach our destination—which was Princess Building near the J.J. Hospital. Here Basit Ansari (who had migrated from Delhi) lived with Moinuddin Harris, a nationalist Muslim and a socialist, and the editor of *Ajmal*, an Urdu daily newspaper which he had started in memory of the great patriot, and renowned Unani physician, the late Hakim Ajmal Khan. The two lived in an airy room in the fourth floor of a *chawl*, and we were invited to spread our bedding rolls on the floor to sleep off our sleepless journey from Delhi. Soon, assured Harris, we would be able to get a room of our own in one of the nearby *chawls*.

The *Bombay Chronicle* office near Flora Fountain and the Town Hall (now the Central Library) was a rickety two storey beehive, a building made mostly of wood which had a rotary machine on the ground floor. When started, it shook the whole building. It was an earthquake which rocked the wooden structure several times a day. I was surprised how they managed to write in such an unstable atmosphere, but within two weeks I was used—attuned would be more appropriate—to it.

Syed Abdullah Brelvi, tall, fair and ascetic-looking, edited this daily paper, with the help of three assistant editors, half a dozen sub-editors and three or four reporters. I was introduced to the three assistants—Basit I knew from the *National Call* days, he shared a cubicle, adjacent to the editorial sanctum, with R.S. Padbidri, an old freedom-fighter, and an amiable man. He was a real Gandhian, since he knew no barriers of caste and creed. There was a cubicle on the other side, too, which was

occupied by R.K. Prabhu, editor of the Sunday edition and a collector of national songs of the world. His cubicle was shared by Kanhaiyalal Vakil, art critic, film editor, and general connoisseur of classical music and classical dancing. He was a lively person, despite the elephantitis in one of his legs which would be carefully wrapped in a *dhoti*.

The sub-editor's room was presided over by Kaka Karai, an old Parsi, who managed to put out the paper with the help of three South Indians—Chidambaram, a chubby and cheerful Tamilian, Narayenswami, a wiry and tough Malyalee, and Rao, an amiable Telugu.

Into this human assortment I found myself placed (again like the *National Call*) in all the departments. I was still the unpaid apprentice assigned to the three branches of journalism—reporting, sub-editing and writing—plus one more: Sunday feature writing. I was told that if I wrote four articles every month, I would be paid twenty rupees for two of them, while the other two would be regarded as just for practice. Since fifty rupees a month was all I was to get from my father, twenty rupees extra per month was not to be sneered at. By now the two of us had got a room of sorts in a *chawl* in Bhendi Bazar, above Gulzar-e-Mohamedi Hotel, which had a tap in the corner so that one could ask one's partner to look out of the miniscular balcony, and have a bath. But the lavatories we had to share with all the other *chawl* dwellers. There was a regular queue there in the morning and, therefore, we solved the problem by getting up very late so that the early rush would be over by then.

Both of us had brought a pillow-case full of *sattoo* mixed with sugar—I had brought *sattoo* of wheat, while Ansar (a real *Purbiya* from Eastern U.P.) had brought *sattoo* made out of rice. Every morning we provided variety—by alternating the wheat *sattoo* with the rice *sattoo*, and having drunk one big glass of *sattoo* we needed no other breakfast. The rent (shared by the two of us) was fifteen rupees per month with two and a half rupees extra for light and water. By eleven o'clock we were shaved, bathed and dressed and ready for our brunch. We took out one rupee each from our trunks and we were on our way to one of the many restaurants in Bhendi Bazar, where a full meal could be had for four to six annas. (Does it sound like a fantasy today?)

From Bhendi Bazar we took a tram to Flora Fountain which cost one anna each. (We couldn't take the bus which cost three annas for the same distance!) We reported for work at about 12 p.m. and did whatever was assigned to us. Tea we never paid for, it would be discourteous to our seniors and elders! Moreover, we were always on the lookout for someone to bunk off from the office to see a picture or attend a lecture (during the time when the editor was not there) leaving us in charge of their department—be it sub-editing or reporting. If, by chance, a telephone call came from the editor, and enquired about that person, we were told to say that he had gone to the bathroom. On his return he would treat us to a meal or high tea—we were not niggardly about ordering sandwiches and *samosas* when someone else was going to pay for them!

If we managed a meal at someone else's expense, we had half a rupee each saved and then we would either buy a Penguin book (price: six annas) or go to a movie (in the five annas class). Or, occasionally, Kanhaiyalal Vakil would invite one of us to a movie premiere or a dance performance and we would revel in unfamiliar luxury.

One place where I went with Kanhaiyalal Vakil was the Three Arts Circle in *Aiwan-a-Rifat*, the palatial residence on Malabar Hill of Atiya Fyzee and her sister who was some sort of divorced or widowed princess. Bernard Shaw, who was passing through Bombay on a luxury liner, was expected to be there and I was naturally excited to have an opportunity to meet the great writer. He did make an appearance—an inordinately tall figure in comfortable, rather than elegant, clothes. There was a decorated cake with greetings written on it in icing, and Mr Shaw was supposed to cut it. He did so, amidst applause, but in the general din he managed to escape, along with the cake. He took a taxi to the boat and remained on board till the steamer sailed away.

Benjamin Guy Horniman who edited our evening paper the *Bombay Sentinel*, was one of those Englishmen (or Irishman) who loved India and were regarded as traitors to the British Raj. He was once Brelvi's boss, but then he was deported to England, and Brelvi, who was his senior assistant editor, was temporarily promoted to take his place. The directors of the

paper were very satisfied with Brelvi and made him permanent editor.

Years later, Horniman returned to his adopted motherland, but the directors of the *Bombay Chronicle* did not want to disturb the arrangement. For some time he edited the newly-started (and soon to be defunct) *Indian National Herald* (not to be confused with the *National Herald* of Lucknow which was to be started later by Jawaharlal), and when that closed down, he was given independent charge of the *Bombay Sentinel*, our evening edition. While he edited it, the *Sentinel* was a force to be reckoned with. I have seen no evening paper with such a following. Horniman's "Vesper Notes," printed in the first column of the front page, was certainly the most pungent—and popular—column in any Bombay newspaper. It was tabloid journalism at its best, with handlines that hit you in the eyes. Even we, of the *Chronicle*, waited for the evening paper to come out and religiously read the "Vesper Notes."

Mr Brelvi, the editor of our paper arrived at 3 p.m. and worked till six or six-thirty. Punctually six o'clock a slim, shortish khadi-clad figure walked into his room without knocking and, if Brelvi was busy with some proofs or some other work, without even a greeting, occupied the easy chair kept in a corner of the room by the window looking out to Elphinstone (later on to be known as Horniman) Circle. This was Vaikunth Mehta, son of Sri Lallubhai Samaldas Mehta, who was an old class fellow and friend of Brelvi.

For twenty years or so, when he would leave his office of chairman of a cooperative bank, he would drop in at the *Chronicle*. When Brelvi's work was finished, the two friends would walk out together, sit in the car and go to Andheri to Sri Lallubhai's residence where Brelvi would have his dinner and after dinner talk, which was invariably about national politics, would be driven to Andheri station from where he would be travel by train to Churchgate and take a taxi to the office for his mid-night half-shift.

This was the only relaxation of Brelvi's bachelor existence and the routine was followed, year after year, and day after day—till one day Vaikunthbhai was presented with a *bhabhi*!

The day after, all of us got a sealed letter from the editor—Basit, Paddidri, Prabhu, Vakil, Karai and even I and Ansar—informing us that a day earlier he had married his orphaned cousin, and he expected good wishes from all of us. We were all thrilled and went in to congratulate Brelvi Saheb who, at the age of nearly forty, was supposed to be a chronic bachelor—his friends also called him the “Chronicle bachelor.” He invited all of us (in batches of three or four) to breakfast with him—and to meet his wife who was newly out of purdah. She was much younger than her husband, and to our eyes looked to be very beautiful in a modest and subdued sort of way, besides having a dignity of her own.

Many were the meals I had at that hospitable dining table in Brelvi’s flat. I might mention one of these, though it was, I think, two years later when I was a regular member of the *Chronicle* staff.

One day Brelvi asked Basit and me to come to breakfast, for he was expecting some important guest. When I arrived at his flat (which was in Churchgate Reclamation, overlooking the Oval) I was told that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was expected. While at Aligarh, I had already met him once in a railway train. I was thrilled at the opportunity of sharing a meal with the idol of the youth, and to listen to his talk—I couldn’t dream of having a discussion with him, that too in the presence of Brelvi Saheb. When he arrived I found him alone, unlike the other “leaders” who never went out without a car load of devotees and hangerson. I found Jawaharlal’s relations with the Brelvis both informal and intimate, and he shook hands with him and did *namaste* to Mrs Brelvi like an old friend. He had a quip at Mrs Brelvi’s culinary prowess and demanded to know what was for breakfast.

“You will just see for yourself,” said Brelvi, “judge whether she can cook well or not!”

Mrs Brelvi proved to be not only a good cook but an excellent hostess. On the table was a variegated spread of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes—including some spicy *shami kababs*. I was curious to know whether Jawaharlal would eat vegetarian or non-vegetarian food. He took some *puris*, some *bahji* and *dahi vada* and started eating with relish. I took *shami kabab*,

and tactlessly asked Jawaharlal, "Panditji, are you a vegetarian?"

That ignited a spark, as if someone had challenged Jawaharlal's famous unorthodoxy and rationalism, as if someone had equated him with all the khadi-clad vegetarian leaders of the Congress. "What do you mean? I—a vegetarian! Certainly not. It was only that last week the doctor advised me to cut down on meat-eating. Pass me that plate of *shami kabab*. They look deliciously tempting."

Brelvi said that since the doctor had advised him against meat-eating, there was no need for Jawaharlal to eat *shami kabab*, but he was adamant. "No, I must have some. I find Mrs Brelvi's vegetarian fare excellent. Now I must test her non-vegetarian cooking."

He took two *shami kababs* in his plate and then triumphantly looked at me and my plate as if to say, "If you can have one, I can have two!"

But, actually, it was plain that he would not like a young admirer of his to go back with the impression that Jawaharlal, too, had scruples against eating non-vegetarian food!

We ought to have returned to Aligarh by the end of September, but on 25 October was the annual session of the Congress. We had not seen a Congress session so far and were eager to participate in "the greatest show on earth."

Worli Hill was the venue of the Congress—though situated near the centre of the city, it was a sparsely populated area at that time. Weeks in advance great preparations were being made to level the ground, make path and roads, and erect the *pandal* and the hutments to house the delegates and the different offices of the organizations associated with the Congress—the Seva Dal, the Khadi and Village Industries Association, the Harijan Sevak Sangh, and so on. But it was decided to allot no place to a conference of socialist-minded Congressmen which was held in a disused *chawl* not far away.

Readymoney Mansion was owned by the knighted capitalist, Sir Cowasji Jehangir—"Readymoney" was his family motto. They were supposed to have cash ready at all times! It was a huge, six storey, sprawling building, divided into huge flats, which were all lying untenanted but for one tenant—K.F.

Nariman, the bachelor Congress leader who, as the chairman of the reception committee, was host-in-chief of Congress. At that time, the building was supposed to be haunted by ghosts, and Nariman must have got the tenancy for a pittance. However they might disagree with his politics, the Cowasji Jehangirs must have been happy to have so well-known a tenant to disprove the "ghost story." I don't know whose idea it was to hold the first conference of the Congress Socialist Party in that disused building, but proximity to Abdul Ghaffar Khan Nagar (as the temporary city of the Congress was called) and the easy availability of a place to hold the conference and to house the delegates must have weighed with the organizers.

I may be said to have been a founder member of the Congress Socialist Party for I was one of the one hundred and thirty seven who attended the inaugural session!

But the blueprints of the Congress Socialist Party were laid down in 1933 by a few young convicts of the civil disobedience movement lodged in Nasik Central Prison. They were: Jayaprakash Narayan, Ashok Mehta, Achyut Patwardhan, Yusuf Meherally, M.R. Masani, N.G. Gore, S.M. Joshi, and M.L. Dantwala.

Similar meetings of the youthful elements, who were feeling ~~betrayed by the leadership because of the withdrawal of the~~ second civil disobedience movement, were held in different jails all over India, for objective conditions were the same everywhere. That is how, as the jail gates opened to discharge some of these youthful socialists who were within the Congress, provincial units were formed, discussions as to future action were held, and the need for an all-India body emphasized. The first Bombay Congress socialist group was formed in Poona. Along with the meeting of the AICC at Patna, a conference of the socialists who were within the Congress was held in the capital of Bihar, convened by Jayaprakash Narayan, and presided by Acharya Narendra Dev. In the words of the president, it was convened "to prevent an outright drift to constitutionalism and to put a more dynamic programme before the country."

The fact was that, everywhere, socialism was in the air, and the Bombay conference institutionalized a political reality of the country. The fact remained that Jawaharlal Nehru—the

one man who, more than anyone else, had popularized the socialist concepts—was at that time in a U.P. jail, in solitary confinement. Acharya Narendra Dev, at the Patna conference, had referred to him as “our great leader” and “our beloved friend,” but Dr Sampurnanand, who presided in Bombay, was not so friendly.

I don’t remember the details of the conference except that it was held in a rather dark hall, and that members squatted on *durries*, with the leaders “enthroned” on a low dais. C.K. Narayenswamy who had taken me there pointed to the leaders present—Sampurnanand, Acharya Narendra Dev, Jayaprakash Narayan (who was elected General Secretary), M.R. Masani (whom we idealized then as an Oxford-educated rebel against his class and his community of Parsi baronets); Namboodripad from Kerala (who would join the communists, reach the extreme left in the Marxist Communist Party to form for some years a communist coalition ministry in Kerala), the elegant and artistically dressed Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (whom we regarded idealistically as the girl comrade of our dreams), Yusuf Meherally, the young, lean and bespectacled general commanding officer of the Congress volunteers, and Faridul Haq Ansari, the sharp-tongued cousin of our colleague, Basit Ansari.

I attended all the meetings, listened to the discussions, breathed the brave air of socialism, and wrote a piece in the *Bombay Chronicle* that the elders at the Worli session of the Congress would have to answer the challenge of their sons and daughters issued from the “Ghost House” across the road.

14. Cold Sweat on a Winter Night

Back in Aligarh, my last year in LL.B. was dominated by a girl called Jehan Ara.

That girl had no parentage, and no residence except my own. She was part of me. We were very close. You could say that we were one. For she was I, and I was she. She was my *nom de plume*.

I wrote a long letter to the editors of three papers, for I wanted to highlight the plight of girls who could study only up to the intermediate in the Women's College. And, for a lark, and to give the letter more importance, I signed it as Jehan Ara. The letter was published as a special article by the *National Call* and *Hindustan Times* and in the correspondence columns by the *Pioneer* of Lucknow.

The article opened with a series of rhetoric questions: "Is a national university worth its name if it consistently ignores the education of one half of the community that it seeks to represent? Are we who have the misfortune to belong to the female sex not considered a part of the Muslim community? Or are we still regarded as having been created only to please and serve men—mere playthings to be toyed with in moments of leisure—and too unclean to be admitted to the sacred temples of knowledge and learning? This is the question that I, in common with thousands of my sisters, whose minds are exercised by the same problem, wish to ask of the authorities of the Muslim university. For they still seem to doubt as to the advisability of giving high education to Muslim girls."

I—or, more correctly, Jehan Ara—quoted the scriptures to prove that Islam enjoined upon all Muslims (not Muslim men alone) the duty of acquiring knowledge. According to the law of the land it was illegal to collect money for the "education of the Muslims" and to spend it on "Muslim men" alone.

The article recalled that, at a meeting of the court of the

university, when it was decided that the "University had no funds to afford the luxury of female education" and ridiculed the one member who "remarked that even if the university had a surplus of five lakhs, they should not spend a pie on female education."

Jehan Ara ended her article with an appeal to Sir Ross Masood, the vice-chancellor, "who is well-known for his liberal views" to give a thousand rupees a month for opening degree classes in the Girls' Intermediate College.

The article created much furore in the university circles, and considerable interest in the identity of the writer, for at that time a Muslim girl writing in English—and that too in a daily newspaper—was an oddity, if not a rarity. The Ismat Chughtais and Qurratul Ain Hyders had yet to make their mark.

Yet there was considerable correspondence from liberal-minded men who rallied round to support the demand for provision of degree classes in the Girls' Intermediate College—which was what I wanted.

But the matter did not end here. The *Pioneer* (which was then edited by Desmond Young, a young Englishman of liberal views and, I suspect, romantic disposition) wrote a longish editorial in support of the Jehan Ara, but cast doubts as to her real identity. By innuendo, he wondered if a Muslim girl could write such a well-argued letter in flawless English. I pounced on the opportunity by penning a rejoinder in which I said, with an air of injured innocence, that no better proof could be adduced to show the backwardness of Muslim women than if a girl ventured to write a "letter to the editor" that credit was also given to a man! One day, I promised tantalizingly, if my guardian allowed me, I will send a photograph of mine for publication.

The gallant editor wrote to say that he felt sorry, and apologized, for doubting the identity of an intelligent young woman and requested my photograph for publication.

The hunt began for a photograph of a young girl—I had to take my close friends in my confidence—and at last one of my friends provided me a photograph of an attractive girl with big black eyes and a cascade of hair falling on her shoulder. On a visit to Calcutta, my friend had fallen in love with a Muslim schoolgirl who had given her photograph to him. Later, after

a misunderstanding, she took back the photograph, tore it into four pieces and flung it out of the window. My friend secretly picked the torn pieces, pasted them together and brought them back with him. The piecing together had distorted the face slightly, without making it ugly, but creating doubt about the identity of the person. The girl was wearing a skirt and blouse in the picture which was overpainted with a sari design—then it was re-photographed with a portrait attachment fitted to my camera.

The result was published by all the newspapers, along with an article against purdah in which I took (for that time) the original line that “not more than fifteen per cent Indian Muslim women observe purdah,” adding that “Eighty per cent of the Muslim women live in villages and cannot afford the costly luxury of observing purdah invented by the upper middle and aristocratic classes living in towns and villages.”

Jehan Ara closed the article on this note: “Let us be free not to be frivolous but to work as our sisters work in the villages, and let us do it ourselves without waiting for the men to come and release us. For if we waited for them, the chances are the hour of our deliverance may never come.”

After the publication of the photograph (only in Delhi and Lucknow papers—not in Calcutta papers) the demand for Jehan Ara’s articles increased so much that I did not get time to devote to *Aligarh Opinion* which suffered for lack of attention. That has been the bane of my life—no sooner have I made a success of any project than I lose interest in it and start on something else. A chance came for a month-long all-India trip with the U.P. universities debating team and, as a result, Jehan Ara’s articles and the publication of the *Aligarh Opinion* both stopped. But I know there were (perhaps still are) many young men (who must have become old men by now) who carry in their hearts the provocative articles (urging reform) and the tantalizing feature of a girl called Jehan Ara.

The debating team consisted of five young men—one each from Aligarh, Agra, Allahabad, Lucknow and Benaras Universities.

I no longer remember that itineary but we went to the universities at Lahore, Patna, Calcutta, Madras, Waltair, Nagpur, Bombay, Poona, Hyderabad and Bangalore, spending from two

to three days in each place. We had prepared speeches on three subjects—I think they were on fascism being a menace to the peace of the world, democracy being a better system of government than dictatorship, and social reforms being more important than political independence.

I had not memorized my speeches, but I knew what I had to say, which I said with topical allusion and local references to give an air of extempore speaking. For instance, if I was speaking on political independence being more important than social reform in Madras, I would begin by saying that while going round Madras I fell in love *with* the Marina beach—though, I added, I understand local boys fell in love *on* the Marina beach. (That always brought the house down). Then I would refer to the aquarium which was situated on the beach and would remark that the protected fish in glass tanks reminded me of social reform—they were disciplined, they got fed every few hours, no big fish was allowed to encroach on their preserve, in short they led an ideal life—except that they were not free! That never failed to click, and I got a reputation for casually drawing on local colour with telling oratorical effect. But it was not casual—the moment I got down at the station, and even when being received by our hosts, I would begin searching for appropriate local touches to work in my speech. It might be the Marina beach and the aquarium in Madras, or it might be the Lawrence Garden in Lahore, or Chowpatty in Bombay. Since then, it has been the strong point—or the weak point—of my “oratory.” The local colour always comes to my rescue—be it for an after dinner toast in Moscow, a speech in a film society in Bangalore or Gulbarga, or an Anti-Fascism Day rally in Bombay.

There are only two other things I remember about the debating team’s all-India tour. I am ashamed to confess that I have even forgotten the exact names of my comrades and companions.

According to my upbringing, I was a strict teetotaler—then even more so than now! But the rest of the four did not mind a peg of whisky at night and pooled their resources to buy a bottle. That night, in the train, all the four had a peg each, but at midnight one of them was discovered having an extra big swing straight from the bottle. It was therefore decided

that, being a teetotaller, the bottle would be entrusted to me for safe-keeping, I would measure out a peg to each before dinner, and then keep the bottle in my overcoat pocket.

Imagine my surprise when at a certain station (it was Bombay, so far as I remember) the Lucknow boy pulled out the bottle from my pocket and explained to our hosts not to mind because I was used to a peg or two before speaking. That brought a big laughter from every one present and I got the reputation of an alcoholic. That certainly was the cruellest "local" joke—at my expense!

The other disappointment which came to us collectively was at Bangalore. In the team that opposed us was a saucy, slim and darkish-complexioned girl with big beautiful eyes. We all fell in love with her at first sight. After the debate we all vied with one another in showering compliments on her for her quite good (but by no means exceptional) speech. Next day a picnic was arranged for us to go up to Chamundi Hill, and we thought it would be a good idea if she also accompanied us along with her male companions. She readily agreed and we all decided to pick her up from her place in the morning.

We must have hardly slept that night, though the bottle was much in demand and, by general agreement, two pegs were imbibed by every one. Early in the morning we shaved with extra care, polished our shoes, bathed and dressed in our best clothes. And when the time came we all piled into a car keeping a place for her on the back seat.

Her house had the look and smell of orthodoxy. She herself welcomed us with a shy gesture, which belied her last night's bold and provocative speech. She introduced us to her parents, and they blessed us. Then she brought over-sweet coffee in metal cups which we drank in silence. We got up to go and waited for her to accompany us. But the father said something in Kannada to one of the local boys and he beckoned us to leave.

"She won't be able to come," he informed us.

Our enthusiasm dampened, we *namaskared* her and her parents and got into our car.

Hardly had the car started that we flung our questions at the local boy.

"What happened?"

"Why can't she come?"

"The old man is afraid—"

"... afraid of what?"

"The old man is afraid of social odium," replied the local boy. "He says you will go away tonight, but he has to marry the girl in a respectable household. And no one will accept her if it was known she had gone out with five strangers."

"One of whom is a Muslim *malechchal*" I added with unnecessary peevishness.

Before the car took the turning out of the lane, I looked back. She was standing in her doorway, looking a picture of disappointment and dismay.

"There is social reform for you," I said, sarcastically, "what this country needs is more than political independence—it needs a revolution."

Whenever I read in the newspapers of students, ex-students or educated youth being involved in cases of thefts and robberies, even armed dacoities—and, of late, there have been several such cases—I naturally sympathize with the poor victims of these dastardly outrages, but also (I must confess) I have a sneaking sympathy and fellow-feeling with the youthful perpetrators of these crimes.

For I know that youth is, by nature, dynamic, defiant, volatile, anti-Establishment, rebellious against parents, teachers and preachers, as well as against government, a law-breaker who has a streak of Robin Hood and Raja Man Singh, the Chambal dacoit, in him. He likes to steal for a lark, for the fun of it (even Jawaharlal Nehru, as a child, once stole his father's fountain pen), he likes to rob for the excitement of it, sometimes he is fascinated by the thrill of danger involved in a daring robbery, sometimes he has a streak of violence, even sadism, in him. I know it, for when I was young and at Aligarh (believe it or not) I, too, had the germs of all these tendencies.

But I tried (consciously or unconsciously) to sublimate or canalize them into healthy and socially non-injurious channels. I took part in heated political debates in the university union and gave vent to the violence, resentment and bitterness within me, *vocally* and so I did not have to do it physically. But even

then, somewhere within me, there was a thief and a robber who was not easily satisfied.

Every evening we used to cycle down to the railway station for a variety of reasons and sensations. For some time the Anglo-Indian station master's longlegged teenaged daughter was the object of hundreds of youthful, sensuous, lecherous eyes. If looks could penetrate her seductive body-clinging dress, she must have been fondled—and even raped—dozens of times each day. But soon her holidays were over, and she was back in her convent school in Mussoorie or Nainital.

Then one of our group suggested a new excitement. It was stealing. The Punjab Mail from Calcutta arrived in Aligarh at about the time of dusky twilight when the dining car would be empty, unlighted, and unguarded, all the waiters being in the kitchen or the pantry, making preparations for the Saheb *log's* dinner. The first day the daring young man nonchalantly walked upto the door of the dining car, peeped in, saw the sideboard loaded with tins of biscuits, cheese, sardines, bottles of squashes and other delicacies. He turned the latch, opened the door, dashed in, and came out with a biscuit tin hidden under his overcoat. Everyone admired his daring acumen and, after the train had steamed out, we all shared the stolen biscuits—which, of course, tasted proverbially sweeter and tastier—washed down by cups of tea.

After that it became a routine for one of us, by turns, to forage in the dining car sideboard for anything that came into one's hands—a tin of butter or cheese or jam or marmalade, a bottle of tomato sauce or orange squash. Then, one day, they told me it was *my* turn. Being the timidest of all, I was dreading the inevitable day. When the train stopped, I postponed the raid to the last second. Only when the guard blew his whistle and I could see, in the distance, his signal lamp winking its green eye, I dashed in, blindly groped for something, anything, that came into my hands. I came out just as the train was moving. When my companions saw what I had stolen they had a hearty laugh and blamed me for my stupidity. For it was a tin of pork sausages—and none of us would eat pig's meat! We threw the useless tin (for us) on the railway lines. That was the end of our stealing adventures.

A few days later, I was escorting a few boys round our campus—they were visiting college students from various universities—who had come to participate in the inter-university debate that was an intellectually exciting annual feature of our social life. When we came to the covered swimming-pool that was the pride of our university, though unused during the cold winter months, they all looked askance at the life-sized portraits of the King and the Queen which, imprisoned in heavy glass frames, decorated the wall behind the diving board.

“You still have those things in your university?” asked one of the young men. Perhaps he was from Bombay. “We got rid of such things a long time ago. Even Queen Victoria’s statue near Flora Fountain has a broken nose.”

This was 1934 or 1935 when the national movement was at its fever-pitch.

Without thinking I blurted out in bravado, “They won’t be here, too, for long.”

The next few days we were all involved in looking after our guests who had come for the debate—one of them was rather a chubby Parsi girl of plain looks but an attractive smile, and the attention of the whole student community was focused on her.

After we had seen them—and *her*—off, I put it to my friends and comrades.

“Well, what about it?”

“What about what?”

“Those pictures of the King and the Queen?”

“Well, what about them?”

“They are the symbols of British imperialism—they have got to be removed.”

“You are right. Let’s do it.”

“But they—the authorities—won’t allow us to remove them!”

“We won’t ask their permission. We will do it at night.”

So that night the four of us—all post-graduate students—turned thieves and robbers. We got together in the deep shadows at the appointed hour of midnight, in the shade of the neem trees in front of the swimming-pool. It was a moonlit night, I remember, but the trees cast deep black shadows.

“The *chowkidar* is asleep in his hut,” one of the group reported reassuringly.

"How shall we get in? The door is padlocked."

"I know a bathroom window which has glass panes. We will break the glass. . . ."

"With a stone? But it will make too much noise. The *chowkidar* might wake up."

"No, we will use this."

He showed us the stump of a broken hockey stick, minus its curved blade, which he used to carry as a swagger stick. Everyone called it his "visiting card." Now we saw that he had wrapped a towel round one end of it to muffle the sound when he hit the glass with it. Some of us at least had the right instincts to qualify as burglars and housebreakers.

The glass was duly broken—there was only a faint tinkle—an arm was pushed in through the hole in the splintered glass and the latch was opened, though the palm of the hand received a gash which had to be bandaged with a handkerchief.

I had brought a torch and, flashing it discreetly, we entered through the shower-rooms and the dressing-rooms, and walked along the length of the pool. Then I directed the beam of the light at the portraits which were hung at a height of six feet or more, and securely fastened to the iron hooks with stout steel wire.

I was the shortest and the lightest, so I had to climb onto the shoulders of the tallest one to reach high enough to disentangle the wire, so that the heavy portraits, first the King and then the Queen, could be loosened from their moorings.

The ring of light made my task easier, but the light also fell on the face of the King who seemed to be scowling at me. It was a life-like painting in the approved academic style, and the larger than life face, into whose hostile eyes I was directly staring in that eerie half-light looked quite frightening. The King clearly did not like being dethroned from that position.

But eventually we got the portrait down, and realized how heavy it was; then it was the Queen's turn. Two of us had to carry each of the framed portraits on their heads like funeral biers—being already phrased-conscious, it did occur to me in that moment that we were acting as the pall-bearers of imperialism!

We carried the portraits to the centre of the football field

which was away from the hostels and the professors' bungalows, and not far from the graveyard. When it came to smashing the heavy plate glasses, we remembered that the bladeless hockey stick had been left behind in the swimming-pool, where its owner had placed it in a corner, while helping with the removal of the portraits.

It was a cold midwinter night, but the danger of that well-known hockey stick being discovered at the scene of the crime brought cold sweat on the faces of each of us. Taking the torch with him, however, the tall one soon retrieved his "visiting card" and we used it to good effect by smashing the glasses and breaking the frames.

Taking out the thick cardboard on which the canvas of the oil-paintings was pasted of the frames, we wantonly vandalized and disfigured the portraits not only with slogans written in thick red pencil and revolutionary red paint—taking the precaution of using our left hands to do the writing—but also by using our pen-knives to gouge out the eyes and slit the throats of the royal couple. A childish exercise of sadism, but it appeased some inner fury in our minds and our hearts which then were seething with patriotic fervour as well as a youthful yearning to do something illegal and brutal.

We impaled those portraits on the iron spikes of a hostel right in front of the British pro-vice-chancellor's bungalow, where he would not miss them when he went out for his early morning walk. Only then we returned to our homes and hostels.

The four participants in this housebreaking and robbery (who were all along "suspected" but never caught for this particular "crime") were, besides myself, my cousin Azhar Abbas, who later became a gazetted government official (alas, no more), Mohsin Abdullah, then the university hockey captain with the telltale hockey stick that was known as his "visiting card," and Ansar Harvani, who was to go to jail several times during the freedom movement and, after independence, became a member of the Lok Sabha for two terms.

Thieves—yes! Robbers—yes! We, too, were thieves and robbers once in our youthful and even childish attempts to vindicate national self-respect. We, too, were foolish, frivolous,

misguided—but our motives, and our actions, were slightly different from the thirteen youthful dacoits who boarded a running train and robbed the passengers at the point of a gun, killing at least two for paltry cash and some trinkets!

15. A City for Conquest

Having bidden farewell to my parents and my sisters in Delhi—and got the talisman of *Imam Zamin* tied round my right arm—I was on the way, this time all alone, to Bombay. No sooner had the train steamed out of New Delhi station where my father had come to see me off, than I had taken off the *Imam Zamin* from my arm, and hidden it in my attache case. I was selfconscious about it. It was a compromise with religion, and I was a new convert to agnosticism, without realizing that that itself was a compromise. I believed—and I did not believe. I was not sure of anything—God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell—the Prophets and the Apostles.

Jawaharlal had told me not to believe (or, rather, he had drawn out the disbelief that was in me) anything unless I was convinced of it. But how to be convinced? Where was the time for that? There was no time to study the Quran, much less all the scriptures of the world! There was no time even to discuss religion with my father. Was there no time? Or was I afraid of discussing it with my father? Afraid of what? My father was not the type that would take a cane and beat me. But I was afraid it would hurt him—and, even more so, my mother—to know that their only son had turned a non-believer, or had doubts about the sanctity of Islam, or for that matter, of any religion.

So I took refuge in the halfway house of agnosticism. For the time being, let us say, I was not sure. When the time would come, I would decide whether to believe or not to believe, after making a comparative study of all religions. Sixty-one years would pass and still there would be no time, and I would be still dangling between Heaven and Hell, between faith and the lack of faith.

The poetry in religion appealed to me, so that I arrived at a theory that religion was mostly the miracle of poetry—

whether it was the poetry of the Quran or the rhythmic mass bending and prostrating of the congregational *Namaz*, the poetry of the *kirtans* and the *abhangas*, or the poetry of the service in a church.

About the outward manifestation of religious differences—parades of the militant Islam or the resurgent Hinduism—I was quite sure I did not believe in them. Communalism, the intrusion of religion in politics, was anathema to me, and soon my feelings would be confirmed when I read the *Autobiography* of Jawaharlal Nehru. He had particularly condemned the Hindu manifestations of it, and I secretly resolved to battle against Muslim communalism!

But that was not what I had learnt at Aligarh. What, indeed, had I learnt at Aligarh during the nine years I had spent there? I was not at all a typical product of Aligarh. Aligarh had been a place where I had learnt the principles of economic and political science, where I had learnt to appreciate poetry and plays, but above all, where I had learnt to express myself clearly, critically, defiantly. But, like many of my generation of Aligarians, I had been subjected to other influences—the three months in the *National Call*, the four months in the *Bombay Chronicle*, the contact with the freedom movement and the socialist movement, through newspapers, and through contact with the leaders of these movements. All this had become a part of me, and I was a part of it. This was the more important influence on me, but without the education and training of Aligarh I could not have assimilated and digested it all.

Also foreigners, whom I could meet only at Aligarh, had influenced me. But there were other Englishmen I had encountered. For instance the boys of the British debating team who had come to speak in a debate with us about the future of fascism in the world. I had participated in the debate, and was struck by the bold and radical views they had expressed—against fascism, against imperialism, even against British imperialism.

I met them informally at dinner the next day at the house of Professor Mohamed Shareef, head of the philosophy department, whose invitation was a great pleasure to accept, for he had four comely daughters.

I got involved in talking to a young man from Oxford—Greenwood, I think, was his name. His father was a Labour M.P. of pronounced leftish inclinations. Oxford university union had just hit the world headlines by passing a resolution to the effect that they would not fight for “King or Country”—the slogan for which so many had fallen in the First World War.

“Is this absolute pacifism of the Gandhian types?” I asked young Greenwood in the course of our conversation.

He said that among those who supported the resolution there *were* some absolute pacifists, but that he was not one of them.

“Then you mean there are other things that *you* will fight for?”

“Yes—haven’t you heard our song?”

“What song?” I enquired.

And he said: “‘The Song of the Fighting Pacifists’.”

And in that ornate drawing room, glowing with the reflection from red lampshades and the yellow flames in the fireplace, a hush fell on the whole group. Even the pretty girls were, for once, silenced as young Greenwood raised his voice and his three companions joined him in the chorus lines.

We are the Fighting Pacifists
We are anything but meek
We don’t let people walk on us
Or turn the other cheek.

There are things that we’ll fight for
But, in spite of all the fuss,
We won’t fight for King and Country
For they don’t belong to us.

Something—something—something
Something—something—something—something.
We’ll fight like hell for any thing
That means the Workers’ good.

There were some other lines (about the evil forces of fascism and capitalism that they would fight) which have become a vague and distant echo in my memory, but the song (I remem-

ber) ended something like this:

And we'll fight the British fascists,
If we knew they would stay the course,
But they have gone and put their black shirts
On a dog and not a horse.

This fighting song, sung in youthful British voices, was enough to thrill everyone present—including the four pretty girls—and there was a spontaneous applause which, mixed with the clatter of the train wheels, still rang in my ears.

And I thought, in that moment, if there are young Englishmen like that, there is hope—there is hope—HOPE—HOPE—and hope thunderously echoed back from the train wheels.

The train was now racing across the Rajasthan desert and I could see here and there, among the sand-dunes, a dome, a ruined fort. History was, indeed, scattered on these sandy wastes.

The speed of the train excited my imagination and I saw whole feudal and imperial armies pass along those ravines and those dunes—the armies of the Mughals, the Rajputs, the Marathas, the Pindaris, the French and the English. They had clashed on these plains, and spilt their blood which had seeped into the soil. It was poisoned blood, for their motives had been empire and lust for power. Was that why nothing grew in these sandy plains? All these had been forces of history, and now in Bombay I would see the latest, and the greatest, historical force—capitalism in action. I didn't believe that capitalism was an import from the West, even if Jawaharlal Nehru said it in his articles and books. Greed—which was the essence of capitalism—was ever present in the psychology of the Indian trader class. The capitalism of the West had only provided a modern setting, contemporary clothing, for this traditional greed—banks, stock exchanges, share bazars, bullion and cotton and grains markets!

In our home were lying hundreds of copies of a book which contained the comprehensive bill for the control of usury, which my late elder uncle, Khwaja Ghulam-us-Saqlain, had moved in the U.P. legislature of which he was a member.

While reading through the bill, and its copious notes and illustrations, I came across the case of an illiterate peasant, untouchable by caste, who had put his thumb-impression on a loan of Rs 100 borrowed from a moneylender, was actually paid Rs 90, the interest having been deducted in advance. He had been paying Rs 10 per month for forty years when he died, having paid about Rs 5,000—all towards interest—while the original amount of Rs 100, and the continual interest thereon, was now payable by his son and heir! My uncle died before the second reading of the bill, which was not pursued and taken up by someone else, and lapsed after his death. It was significant that even the nationalist legislators did not take interest in it. Which brought to my mind, the third class compartment in that speeding train being full of consumptive and enfeebled peasants, the question which “the Russians”—the few communists and pro-communists in the university—had always raised: What is the class character of the Congress? “Nationalism,” as Jawaharlal Nehru had written in his *Whither India* series of articles, “covers many sins.” Was pro-capitalism one of them? Then what were socialists, like Jawaharlal Nehru, doing in such an organization? There were questions within questions!”

I managed to sleep somehow in that perplexed state of mind, in that crowded third class compartment, and when I awoke it was morning, and the train was standing at Palghar, from where an electric engine would drive us to Bombay Central. Within two hours or so we would be in Bombay, and my mood changed to welcome the prospects.

I was taking a decisive step in going to Bombay—for my identical twin tin trunks contained everything I possessed—one had in it almost all my books, and the other all my clothes. I had two cotton padded trunk coverings with frills—I would put them on in the day and they would be settees. At night I would join them together and would sleep on them. I had two pillow-cases full of *sattoos* to last me for breakfast for three months. And I had a hundred and fifty rupees in my pocket which my father had given me for three months in Bombay. “If by then, you don’t become self-sufficient, you come back and start practice in Lucknow or Allahabad—there I would give you Rs 250 per month because in the first few months you must do free cases to build a reputation for yourself.”

"But, *Abba*, the results are not yet out. I might fail in LL.B."

"You won't," he had said. And that was that.

Now, with hundred and fifty rupees in my pocket, which had to last me three months, two pillow-cases full of *sattoo*, two trunks, and a bedding roll, I was ready for the siege of Bombay.

The first three months, while staying with Basit Ansari as a non-paying guest, I drove myself crazy, working for the *Bombay Chronicle*.

My status was the same as before—unpaid apprentice. Four articles for the Sunday editions for Rs 20. (I had brought with me a large collection of picture postcards, which then cost an anna each, of Delhi, Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, and Jaipur, which when published along with the relevant articles, would be paid for at a rupee per "photograph"—or picture postcard.) The Sunday edition was, frankly, a scissors-and-paste affair, and my articles were about the only original features in it. For who else would agree, even at that time of cheap prices, at the rate at which I was writing? A French photographer got hysterical and nearly fainted when he was offered "our usual rates," i.e., Re 1 for each glossy 12×15 print and Rs 3 for the special colour photograph which would be published on the cover.

But, apart from profiteering on the picture postcards, I really worked hard. I was the hardest worked individual on the staff. If there was any meeting to be reported, which the regular reporter was too busy or reluctant to cover, I offered myself. If there was sub-editing to be done, I agreed to do it. If the film critic was loth to cover the premiere of some third rate film, I was prepared to deputize for him. If there was any miscellaneous writing work to be done—an "intro" to an article, for instance—I was glad to do it. This, in addition, to whatever was the work assigned to me as an apprentice sub-editor-cum-reporter. There was a method to my madness. It was the fear of the fifty rupees per month being stopped at the end of the three months, that drove me like mad. I had nightmares of dreary courts of law, with bald-headed magistrates and bewigged judges, with puny me helplessly arguing before them. Then I would awaken in a cold sweat and get up, even if it was four o'clock, to dash off some article or report that was supposed to be ready by the afternoon.

But one thing I did not do to get rid of the predicament—that was to explore some other avenues of employment. The *Times of India* advertized for fresh young graduates—they had paid apprentices, getting more than a hundred rupees a month—but I wouldn't dream of applying. (Another unpaid apprentice who was then being trained *under me* did apply and was taken. He left one day, without saying goodbye to any one, but with tears in his eyes, for he had to support a whole family on his earnings.) The "Old Lady of Bori Bunder," as B.G. Horniman used to refer to the *Times of India*, was out of the question for a dew-eyed young patriot and socialist like me. It was like government service. The *Bombay Chronicle* was the only nationalist daily. For me it was that or nothing. I had to become indispensable to it—a lad of all work—without whom the editor would not be able to run the paper!

The three months were soon over. On the last day I went to the editorial sanctum. My legs were shaking—so I did the unprecedented thing—I sat down even before Mr Brelvi had asked me.

"What is it?" he asked me in his kindly voice.

I was on the verge of tears but I managed to hold them back. I said, in a voice choked with emotion, that I was going back to Delhi the next day.

"What will you do there?"

"I will practise in a law court—in Allahabad or Lucknow—my father has agreed to give me an allowance of Rs 250 per month." I said it as if my father had sentenced me to a life of penal servitude.

"How much do you need to stay in Bombay?" he asked me.

Before I could think, or calculate, I replied, "Fifty rupees a month."

"All right," he said, "you are appointed on fifty rupees a month from tomorrow."

He scribbled on a chit and gave it to me with instructions to give it to his secretary just outside.

I thanked him and came out walking on air. I gave the chit to the secretary, the tough-looking but kindly Maharashtrian, S.R. Kakirde. He read it and said, "Congratulations." On the chit was written, "Put K.A. Abbas on the pay roll—Rs 50 per month."

I dashed off a rather acrimonious letter to my father informing him that henceforth he was not to worry about sending me any allowance, that I had become (in the stipulated three months) self-sufficient in a city like Bombay. I did not mention the salary which I was given as a start. That was no concern of the old man.

I had arrived to conquer the city. I was a member of the staff of the great *Bombay Chronicle*, the voice of the people. I did not know—but soon I would know—that the October salary I would be getting not in November, but in the middle of December, and that the twenty rupees a month for four articles should be stopped for now I was a regular member of the staff and could not expect “extra” payment!

But I was thrilled when my name appeared the next day in Kaka Karai’s duty schedule book. I was on mid-shift. “3 to 11 p.m.—Chidambaram, Rao, Abbas.” Was I thrilled to see it!

I had arrived about half an hour earlier and was the first to see the cabled news: *Abyssinia invaded, and bombed, by Mussolini’s fascists!* The date was 2 October 1935.

16. The Birth of an Anti-Fascist

Mussolini unleashed fascism on the day that I became a regular member of the *Chronicle* staff. Thereafter it was fascism that haunted me, or I that chased fascism—or its German alter-ego, the Nazism of Hitler, or the Japanese variety of militarism. In course of time the three aggressive phenomenons came to be known to the world as fascism. The news editor's room in a daily newspaper gave me a ringside seat, as it were, at this great and tragic political drama.

For a period, Jawaharlal was in Europe, having been discharged from prison on 4 September, because of the deterioration in Kamala's health in a T.B. sanatorium in Switzerland. He passed through Bombay, and looked wan and miserable. One could imagine the mood of the husband and the anti-fascist as he saw his beloved, frail wife sinking and the mists of fascism rising all over Europe.

Yet the national and international cause was never far from his thoughts. In-between helplessly nursing his wife, Jawaharlal Nehru went briefly to England, France and Germany, participated in political conferences with leaders of the anti-fascist forces, and explained to the public and the press what nationalist India's stand was on various political issues. From Badenweiler, he wrote a series of letters to Lord Lothian who was president of one of the committees discussing Indian reforms. Inevitably, parts of these letters reached India and I was glad to read, for instance, that "British rule in India has inevitably helped in creating political unity in the country." The mere fact of common subjection was bound to result in a common desire to be rid of it." How simply it was put! Strange that it had not occurred to all those apologists of the empire who continued to repeat, day in and day out, that the British had united India!

A few days before his wife's demise, Jawaharlal Nehru

was in London answering some of the correspondents pertinent and occasionally impertinent, silly questions that came over the teleprinter to us in Bombay. It was exciting to read the repartee:

Q. We need not go as far as China and Japan to consider the North-Western question and the very immediate close danger of Russian aggression

A. . . .With regard to Soviet Russia, the first proposition is that there is no power in the world today which is more peaceful, and less inclined to aggression than Soviet Russia. I think that is admitted by everybody; it is publicly admitted by the British Foreign Office, in fact, the Foreign Secretary, Mr Eden, said so the other day

I was naturally sad when the news came of Kamala's death—I remember I skipped my meal that day—and my heart went out to the grief-stricken but stoic Jawaharlal in the hour of his bereavement. I sent off a letter of condolence to him which probably never got to him—but it was a duty which I had to perform.

And then, over the teleprinter ticker, came the news that Jawaharlal Nehru, on his way to India, had refused to see Mussolini—the butcher of Abyssinia.

“Nehru Refuses to See Musso.” My pencil scribbled the heading to the single column box item. And in fact, one of the *first things that Jawaharlal did on arrival in India* was to call for the observance of “Abyssinia Day” on 5 May 1936.

I was naturally inclined to the anti-fascist cause and Jawaharlal Nehru's example encouraged me. My first political pamphlet was an exposure of “*Mussolini, Fascism and the War in Abyssinia*.” It is incredible to think today that this sixty-four page booklet was priced at a little more than a quarter of a rupee. I also took a small part in Abyssinia Day and addressed a meeting in the Nagpada Neighbourhood House. There I encountered a certain sympathy, among Hindus, Muslims and strangely enough, even among Jews, who all had been taken in by Mussolini's propaganda that, for instance, under the fascist regime, the trains in Italy ran on time!

But, meanwhile, we had been electrified (albeit from afar)

by Nehru's presidential address at the Lucknow session of the Congress which was delayed for Jawaharlal's return. How true was his definition of fascism! He was certainly one of the earliest world statesmen to discover that:

Capitalism, in its difficulties, took to fascism with all its brutal suppression of what civilisation had apparently stood for; it became, even in some of its homelands, what its imperialist counter-part in the subject colonial countries. Fascism and Imperialism thus stood out as two stages of the now decaying capitalism, and, though, they varied in different countries according to the national characteristics and economic and political conditions, they represented the same forces of reaction and supported each other, and at the same time came into conflict with each other, for such conflict was inherent in their very nature. Socialism in the West, and the rising nationalism in the Eastern and other dependent countries, opposed this combination of fascism and imperialism.

On socialism his address was as unequivocal. "I am convinced that the only key to the solution of the world's problems and of India's problems lies in socialism, and . . . I use this word in its scientific, economic sense . . . Socialism is thus for me not merely an economic doctrine which I favour; it is a vital creed which I hold with all my head and heart."

Along with the Lucknow Congress was held, among other "side shows," the first All-India Progressive Writers' Conference, with the blessings of Gurudev Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru. It was mobilized a number of young and radical writers, some of whom were working directly under Jawaharlal in the various offices which he had established in the central secretariat of the All-India Congress Committee at Allahabad. These included Sajjad Zaheer, Dr K.M. Ashraf, Ram Manohar Lohia and Mulk Raj Anand who had just returned from England after finishing his education and making a name for himself with his first novel, *The Untouchable* and had joined the group which he knew in England. The veteran of Urdu and Hindi literature, Munshi Premchand, agreed to preside over the conference.

Though no Marxist, and showing in his novels and short stories a distinctly Gandhian stamp, Munshi Premchand had revealed an awareness of Indian poverty and the sordidness of life—as in his short story, *Kafan*—which approximated to the socialist realism of the Marxists. He was basically a humanist, as were most of the writers of the new school, which was making considerable headway in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and in the southern languages of Malayalam and Telugu.

I received a bunch of printed material about the Progressive Writers from Lucknow and it struck a responsive chord in me. I knew Munshi Premchand but slightly because once when I was in Aligarh School, he had come and stayed with Bhaijan and I had sat in a corner when he read out one of his Urdu short stories. Since then I had read almost all his short stories and novels and felt moved and impressed by his mastery of the details of life of U.P. villages—especially the life of the down-trodden peasantry.

I felt both happy and privileged at receiving the literature about the Progressive Writers movement, for I had hardly written anything creative—except one short story in Urdu called *Ababeel* about the latent humanity of a peasant who was, because of circumstances, apparently a sadist. This story, however, had been printed in a reputable Urdu magazine which had somehow found its way to London, where it had been read by Dr Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zaheer, who proceeded to translate it into English and published it in a magazine called *New Indian Literature*. Thus (I learnt now) I was accepted as a progressive writer like Krishen Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Sajjad Zaheer, Mehmoduz Zafar, Rashid Jehan, Ahmed Ali, all well-known young writers—and Mulk Raj Anand in whose awe I lived, for had he not achieved international fame as a writer?

In this movement, over the years, I found my home and my school, my workshop and my library, amongst its members I found my friends and my comrades. Many of them were Communists and, sometimes, tended to be overbearingly doctrinaire and sectarian. But, by and large, they tolerated my petite bourgeoisie tendencies, my romanticism and my idolatrous devotion to Nehru, as I put up with their authoritarian (and some times) childish *diktats*. There would be a time when (in

1943) they would turn me out of the Progressive Writers' Association and the Indian People's Theatres Association over ideological differences, but even then they would not be able to close the doors of their minds and hearts on me, and some years later they would see the error of their ways, and hold a meeting of the *revived* Progressive Writers' Movement—under my presidency! But I am far anticipating the story.

Soon, the problems of rupees, annas and pies (we were still in the archaic age) confronted me. Fifty rupees, which I had rashly said would be enough to sustain me in Bombay, were just fifty rupees—and could not be stretched beyond that. As I continued to live in Bombay, even as an unpaying guest, the old clothes were getting worn out, and new ones had to be prepared or bought. Things were pretty cheap still, but no one gave them free. Where was money to come for clothes, and furniture (also cheap), and books that I wanted to buy and read (also luckily still cheap—you could buy three Penguins for a rupee!)? And I would not write to my father out of an exaggerated sense of my self-respect.

So I thought of an idea. Why should I not write film publicity for some of the studios? They sent out copies of the same badly written blurb, prepared by some illiterate hack. I could work for them on a Sunday—or off-day—and prepare five or six short articles or write-ups that they could send out to different papers that were anxious to publish what was reasonably written.

So I started going round to the likely producers. I tried two or three in Parel or Dadar, but I drew a blank. "How much would you charge us?" one of them asked me. I said for four Sundays I would charge him only twenty rupees!

"No, thank you, our present arrangements are quite satisfactory," he said and dismissed me.

Then I thought of going farther a field. My old friend Najm Naqvi, who shared accommodation with me in Bhaijan's house, had managed to come to Bombay and was now an assistant director to the German director Franz Osten under the legendary Himansu Rai.

Devika Rani was the star of Bombay Talkies. I had seen her *Karma* and admired her acting (she spoke in English like

an Englishwoman) and then I had seen her *Jawani ki Hawa* and had written in the *Chronicle* that she also spoke Hindi like an Englishwoman! But now I wrote a flattering portrait-in-dots of Devika Rani and a write-up about their latest picture, probably *Achhut Kanya*, and took them to Najm. He promised to show them to Himansu Rai and see what happened. After three days I got a telephone message from Najm that the "Boss" wanted to see me next Sunday morning at six a.m. I thought the time was a joke but he insisted that it was serious. Later on I got quite used to Himansu Rai's early morning appointments but that night I could hardly sleep for fear of missing the early morning train to Malad from Bombay Central, for which I also had to take the first tram out.

But I caught the 5 a.m. train, was at Malad station by 5-45 a.m. and at five minutes to six I was in the studio. My friend met me at the gate and told me the "Boss" was in his room, waiting for me.

"You mean he is already here?" I asked him in surprise.

"Yes—he has been here for at least fifteen minutes."

I found Himansu Rai to be a handsome middle-aged intellectual-looking Bengali (aren't all Bengalis intellectual-looking?) who chain-smoked, pushing one stub into the water-filled ashtray and putting the other one in his mouth.

He told me that he liked my stuff and asked me to join them as publicity manager.

I said I was a journalist and not interested in doing film publicity as a career.

He offered me three hundred rupees a month for a start.

I said I was still not interested.

"Then what do you want?" he asked, in desperation.

I told him. I wanted part-time work—one day a week, maybe Sunday, maybe some other off-day—when I would complete at least six write-ups for them.

"All right. But for that I cannot pay you more than seventy-five rupees a month!"

I didn't understand him at first, when I did I felt dizzy. Fifty rupees a month for twenty-six days of back-breaking office work, and seventy-five rupees for just four days that would be a kind of Sunday picnic. I would scribble the stuff in the train, type it in the studio, and be free before lunch,

which I would get free in the studio cafeteria.

I accepted the terms, and it was the beginning of a long friendship with Himansu Rai, with Devika Rani, with various other members of their staff including Sasadhar Mukerji and a shy and reticent Ashok Kumar (I remember the day when he was taken out of the laboratory where, being a science graduate, he was working as an assistant, and asked to make-up for *Jeevan Naiya*). His first shot was jumping into a room through a window, and I got a brain wave. "Ashok Kumar Crashes into Stardom" was the obvious headline to a blurb that I wrote for the occasion. Himansu Rai, once actor, then producer, had an obsession with respectability and education. "Bring me a graduate from a good family and I will make him into actor." Ashok Kumar is certainly an advertisement of his methods.

I remember Devika Rani holding court in the verandah of her studio-bungalow—a fragile, pretty, petite and glamorous figure in her simple chiffon saris, her head adorned with fresh red flowers. Every one of us young men was secretly in love with her. I remember the day she got her greatest fan letter—from no less a person than Jawaharlal Nehru. He had seen her *Achhut Kanya* somewhere in between two jail terms and was struck by her histrionic ability. She read the letter out to us, but (all credit to her) she resisted the temptation to capitalize on its publicity value. "It is not that kind of letter," she said.

Years later, after Himansu Rai had died, and she had become Mrs Roerich, at an "at home" given in Delhi by Panditji to all participants in a film seminar which she had organized for Sangeet Natak Akadmi, I reminded both of them of that letter, and Jawaharlal Nehru had a hearty chuckle. Devika Rani said, "Now Panditji gets all the fan letters."

But to go back to 1936, at the end of it, two events of international and national importance moved me.'

On the 25 November 1936, in the great Kremlin Palace, 2,040 delegates gathered to adopt the new constitution of the USSR, which was later to be known as the Stalin constitution. It marked a distinct stage in the progress of the Soviet Union in the economic, political, cultural and social spheres. Later on I read an elaboration of this constitution in the two volumes

by the Webbs—Sydney and Beatrice.

This was, indeed, the flood tide of socialist thought and communist ideology in the world. The doubts, the deviations, the distortions, the abrogation of "socialist legality," the cult of personality, were all to come much later. At that time it seemed God (or Stalin) was in his heaven, and all was well with the future of the world!

Another event took place at that time that not only monopolized the front pages of the world press but fired the imagination of the progressives and youth. For the first time in history, a king—the King of Britain, Edward VIII—voluntarily gave up his throne for the sake of his love for a divorced lady, the lovely Wally Simpson. This was a story which was enough to set the mind of any hot-blooded youth on fire. Added to the romantic angle were the rumours that King Edward, as Prince of Wales, had displayed unusual traits, that he had leanings towards socialism, and hated the iron-clad conventions of royalty and society. He was known to have taken a real interest in the lot of the miners in Wales—the most miserable have-nots in Britain. We liked to believe that it was not merely for Wally Simpson that Edward had to lose his throne, but for his sympathy for the working class.

Two weeks later came the Faizpur session of the Congress which was the second Congress session I attended. Several of the reporters and sub-editors were officially and un-officially going to Faizpur and I got leave to accompany them. I was not officially assigned to cover the session—senior reporters would look after that—but my editor asked me to send some human interest stories from the proceedings. I remember the train journey to Faizpur (in Khandesh) in a third class compartment which was so jam-packed that I had to sleep on the floor, smelling the feet and *chappals* of the multitude on the benches in my sleep. But who minded a little discomfort when one was twenty-two, and a budding journalist, a patriot and a socialist to boot, on his way to cover the first session of the national organization held in a typical village?

Presenting the new constitution of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin had said, "This will be a document testifying to the fact that what has been achieved in the USSR can be fully realized in other countries too." The response to this came

(believe it or not) from the Congress Socialist Party which proposed at the subjects committee of the Faizpur session urging that the "Congress declares the solidarity of the Indian people with the enslaved peoples of the world, whether colonial or of the so-called 'sovereign' states, and with the people of the USSR"

I heard and applauded the speeches at Faizpur, especially the presidential address of Jawaharlal Nehru who had been elected again. War was on his mind for he said at the very beginning:

The problem of maintaining peace cannot be isolated by us from war resistance. . . We can be no party to an imperialist war, and we will not allow the exploitation of India's man power and resources for such a war. Any such attempt will be resisted by us.

Towards the end came the resolution on Spain and the war, drafted (as usual) by Jawaharlal, that greatly excited me, and created a desire to go abroad, while it was still possible, and the ways were not blocked by the armies and the navies:

The Congress has followed with deepest sympathy and anxiety the struggle that is going on in Spain between the people of Spain and a military group aided by foreign mercenary troops and Fascist powers in Europe. . . .

The Congress, on behalf of the people of India, sends greetings to the Spanish people and the assurance of their solidarity with them in the great struggle for liberty. . . .

While listening to Jawaharlal speaking on the resolution, I made a mortal resolution that, whatever the difficulties, I would try to make a trip abroad before the war clouds enveloped the world.

Back in Bombay, the first thing I did was to buy a typewriter on hire-purchase, out of my savings from the Bombay Talkies earnings. The price was seventy-five rupees down and the remaining hundred and thirty rupees in thirteen instalments of ten rupees. Then I bought every single daily, weekly and monthly that would pay its contributors, and studied their

respective requirements. I quietly resolved to type a piece every morning before breakfast, post it and only then touch my first meal of the day. I kept it up for a year—and short stories and articles of every sort, from anti-fascism to feminine gossip—came off my typewriter with equal felicity.

In a year, I consumed twelve reams of paper, wore out a dozen typewriter ribbons, and the end result was that I had roughly four thousand rupees in a bank called the Travancore and Quilon Bank, which was in Churchgate Street, nearest to the *Chronicle* office and where I could open an account and get a cheque book with a deposit of only five rupees.

While pursuing my money-saving and world trip plans, I was not neglecting my work or my political studies. In fact they were all interrelated, since I wanted to go on a sort of educational tour of the world, before the armageddon. I was a member of the local Progressive Writers' Association where I met Anant Kanekar (the Marathi writer) and Jeethubhai and Bakoollesh (Gujarati writers). I was promoted as film critic when Kanhaiyalal Vakil expired, and to mollify my temper against Hollywood's usual lampoons in India, had invitations to visit the Hollywood studios extended by their local representatives.

My urge for foreign travel had been whetted by two interviews I had with two dissimilar personalities who happened to be visiting Bombay and staying at the Taj Mahal Hotel at about the same time. One was the shy, stuttering, middle-aged Somerset Maugham, whose stories and novels I had been avidly reading for a long time. The second was John Gunther, bumptious, hail-fellow-well-met-type, whose name was new to me but whose *Inside Europe* was the first of his "Inside" books which purported to give inside glimpses of countries and the people that matter. Now he was in India collecting material for his *Inside Asia*. In the headline to the twin interviews I called them "The Lion and the Lamb of Literature."

I asked Somerset Maugham for an autograph for which I presented a copy of his *Altogether* and on the fly-leaf he made an exhortation that I pass on to every aspirant to journalism—or literature:

Write about things that you know and as simply as possible.

Also, through Bakoolesh, I discovered Upton Sinclair, who was surely the dean of progressive writers. It was my ambition to meet him in person and to talk to him about things of common concern. Pearl Buck was another American favourite of those days—her *Good Earth* and *Sons* made a great impression on me—and, of course, Sinclair Lewis, Steinback and Earnest Hemingway. It was remarkable that to the young men of my generation, except for a passing deference to British writers, like Bernard Shaw and Somerset Maugham, most of our favourite authors were Americans. Somehow, they communicated a sense of much greater vigour and vitality which suited our mood of the moment.

On the political front, the big news was the Congress decision to contest the elections and Jawaharlal's phenomenal fifty thousand miles election tour—by every conceivable means of locomotion that he could use including airplanes, railway, motor car, truck, horse carriage, bullock cart, cycle, elephant, camel, steamer, boat, canoe and on foot. On most of this tour he was accompanied by one of his secretaries, Mehmuduz Zafar, who was an intellectual and, later, a communist worker. He told me amazing stories of Panditji's grit and guts, and his secular morality, which prevented him from partaking of a meal where his Muslim secretary was considered "unclean" and asked to eat separately! Once he put his holdall on his head and asked Mehmud to do the same, and they spread their bedding in the village *chaupal*, rather than enjoy the hospitality of a caste-conscious Brahmin.

The Congress decision to enter the legislatures was directly related to my ambitions to travel abroad, for I was on the banned list for passports. But I had got my editor's promise to get me the travel document if Congress won the polls in Bombay and a sympathetic Home Minister took the reigns of office.

The Congress did win the elections and a Congress ministry was installed in Bombay. Now I reminded my editor, and Brelvi Saheb wrote a long letter to the Home Minister, recommending my application. By the beginning of 1938, I was in possession of a passport which was valid for all countries "except the USSR!" I was not the only one in the prison that was India to get a reprieve to go out. There were others

who were thinking along the same lines, and Yusuf Meherally, the Congress Socialist leader, was one of them. He invited me to accompany him to an anti-fascist youth congress that was to be held in New York in August and I was glad to say "Yes." That was the kind of opportunity I was seeking in giving a purpose and direction to my otherwise aimless tour.

I had, meanwhile, become an expert of the shipping lines which at that time were engaged in cut-throat competition. One of the lines offered me a round-the-world ticket (economy class) for less than a hundred and twenty pounds. (The pound was about fourteen rupees while a dollar cost less than three rupees.) This included first class overland by train from Vancouver to New York. But there was a snag in it. The ticket was for an Eastward trip—I would not be able to go to Europe till I finished with the youth congress in New York, while all the other delegates were going to Europe and then on to America.

The prospect of travelling alone was a little frightening, but looked more adventurous and I was in the mood for adventure. I bought the round-the-world trip paying about seventeen hundred rupees out of my total savings. That left about two thousand in the bank.

And then, two weeks before the departure, and on the very day that I was to visit my home town of Panipat to bid farewell to my father, mother, and sisters, the Travancore and Quilon Bank crashed! In a melodramatic moment, all my savings were gone.

I was left holding a round-the-world steamer ticket. And that was all!

17. No Cherry Blossoms for Me

I almost did not start on my world tour in the summer of 1938.

The bank crash, which came fifteen days before the steamer was to leave, left me high and dry. I had no alternative but to explain the situation to my father and mother and appeal to them to come to my rescue. I only needed two thousand rupees. My father frowned upon my rashness in selecting the smallest and most undependable bank in Bombay. But my mother, affectionate and impulsive as ever, took off her gold *kadas* (bracelets) and asked me to pawn them. My sisters (one elder and two younger ones) also volunteered to contribute their trinkets which my mother had got made for them, unknown to my father who was opposed to such "wasteful" expenditure. Ultimately all the ornaments were saved when my father gave me a cheque for two thousand rupees cashable in a Delhi bank. Then I knew that I could go.

I came back to Bombay and converted the money into traveller's cheques. The world currencies were very unstable in that era of depression and I got dollars at the rate of less than three rupees, and pounds at a little more than thirteen rupees.

Jawaharlal Nehru had left for Europe early in June. Now I made my preparations to follow him, but the other way around the world. Cheap steamer tickets were available only if one took the eastward route, and I couldn't afford to spend anything more.

I got a double-breasted blue woollen suit made for me, a fawn one of "summer" suiting, a grey pants and jacket combination and six shirts which I would wash myself. And that was all. But I had my typewriter with me, and with that I hoped to earn a little on the way.

On the 27th, a day before the Italian steamer was to leave, I was so excited that I asked my friends to keep me company at night and we spent it drinking innumerable cups of tea and

talking. The result was that when I presented myself in the morning to the ship's rotund Italian doctor for a routine check-up, he felt my pulse, frowned, inserted a large thermometer in my mouth, and taking the reading, said I had fever. At that time there was cholera and enteric fever suspected in Bombay, and he said he would not be able to take me on board. I was stunned, and pleaded with him, almost fell at his feet. Then he relented to the extent of keeping me in the ship's hospital in quarantine and to return me from Colombo if the fever did not disappear by then. I readily agreed to his proposal and signed the paper that was put before me. Having perfunctorily bidden goodbye to my friends, I boarded the ship in the company of a forbidding nurse (who later proved to be most kind), was taken to the ship's hospital and stripped of my clothes, and laid between white sheets. I never saw the outline of Bombay receding from my view. I was asleep within a few minutes.

In the evening when I got up, and was given some hot broth to drink, I had no fever. But that day I was not supposed to move and I slept again. Meanwhile, my cabin fellow passengers and my cabin steward surmised that, after sending my suitcase up to the cabin, I had either missed the boat or had fallen overboard and got drowned. When on the third day—the day we were to dock at Colombo—I retruned from the hospital to my cabin, they all looked at me as if I had risen from the dead!

I was travelling second economy class and there were all sorts of nations represented in our class. There were several German and Austrian Jews who had left their fatherland although it meant losing their property. Jews were then allowed (even encouraged) to migrate to another country by the Nazi government, provided they left their money and their property behind. At that time, the German Jews were strongly enough going to settle down in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo or Canada and America, few had thought of their so-called original homeland of Palestine. Zionism then had not the same appeal to the Jews as it has today.

There was also a group of Chinese students returning from Germany where they had gone for advanced studies. They were a cheerful lot and had nothing of the reticence and exclusiveness which would later characterize their countrymen. They

were among the most popular passengers on board. I was sorry that I could not talk German to them, and I am sure they were sorry they did not know Hindustani or English to converse with me. In half English and half pantomime I managed to inform one of them about the wave of pro-Chinese feeling in India and Jawaharlal's proposal to send an Indian ambulance unit to China. He was delighted to hear it, and, in broken but obviously sincere words, expressed his people's gratitude. "China-India—we must be friends," he passionately concluded.

Among the Indians on board, there was a majority of Sindhi and Kathiawari merchants who were going to Japan in connection with their business. One of them, who was hardly twenty-five came from Hyderabad (Sind) and had been to France, Spain, Italy, China and Japan and could speak several languages fluently. The rise of such an enterprising community as the Sindhis was a new phenomenon in India's economic life and had to be welcomed as providing a much-needed corrective to the lack of initiative and enterprise which was characteristic of many families as well as business concerns in India.

If I expected Ceylon, "the Pearl of the Orient," to be an enchanted land with its mythological associations with Ravan's *Lanka*, I was in for a disappointment. We saw nothing of Colombo but a bleak water-front studded with a long line of ugly tin sheds stretching for miles, dominated by an oversized sign "CEYLON FOR GOOD TEA." One was instantly reminded of the European-owned tea plantations which were as notorious for the exploitation of labour as the tea estates of Assam, the Nilgiris and Kerala. I would have to visit free Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) once again to get its beauty in perspective.

At that time, we were only allowed four hours "shore leave" and I was lucky that a college friend, Badiuddin, to whom I had written earlier, warning him of my impending brief visit, was there to receive me. He was with his car, so that we would go round the city without losing much time. I found the bazars like an extension of Bhendi Bazar and Kalbadevi and Dariba of Delhi. I was not surprised to find even the inevitable Irani restaurant but the board outside read "Bombay Eating

House." The colonial heritage still clung to Colombo—a clean large area with palatial buildings, fine shops and wide roads for the Saheb *log* and a few local plutocrats of the comprador class, and then there was the dirty, congested "native" quarter which seemed to be deliberately kept in that condition in order to parade the "colourful and odorous East."

While driving round, my friend, a progressive, kept up a running commentary on local politics. The Singhalese, mostly Buddhists, had their "Ceylon National Congress," a body of moderates and constitutionalists, like the early Indian National Congress. The Muslims, mostly descended from early Arab traders, had a muslim League." The Christians and the Tamils had parties of their own. But the party of the future (as, indeed, it proved to be later) was Lanka Sama Samaj, started by young socialist and radical intellectuals, working up a mass basis. My friend who stuck to the Lanka Sama Samaj Party, is today a minister in the cabinet of Mrs Bandaranaike, a veteran of the Sri Lanka national struggle.

In retrospect, it seems to be a much better way of travelling than the modern airplane rush-about where you don't get a proper glimpse even of the airports. Four days after leaving Ceylon, we spent a whole day in Singapore. While the ship did its loading and unloading, we had time to see the city.

In Singapore I could actually see China, though we were still hundreds of miles from real China. The population of Singapore is predominantly Chinese, and here I could see the new Chinese youth—bold and assertive, not the old Mandarin types at all. I also saw Chinese girls (I had never imagined they could be so elegant) who were, until a few decades ago, condemned to live with tiny, bound and twisted feet, going about their daily business with self-confidence and easy grace. I found them intensely patriotic.

I noted the names on the signboards of three consecutive shops: Kishanchand—Nassim Saleh—Lee Woo and Co. An Indian, a Malay Muslim, and a Chinese. Some Chinese merchants had achieved conspicuous success in business and could be counted among millionaires or billionaires. We saw the house of one such Chinese plutocrat—the manufacturer of a well-known brand of patent medicine! This house which was

kept open to visitors—possibly as an advertisement stunt!—was built on a small hill of its own and was an example of the infantile imagination of a plutocrat producing an architectural nightmare!

I also visited the slumland of Singapore where thousands of poor Chinese live in what are known as “cubicle dwellings.” In that very morning’s newspaper I read the report of Dr Hunter, the municipal health officer, who described the living conditions of this area “as almost inhuman” and called for “drastic, very drastic measures” to deal with them.

Hong Kong, even at the unearthly hour of 3 a.m. when we docked, was a magnificent sight. Like Rome of old, it is situated on seven—or, perhaps, even more—hills. The lights of Hong Kong, which we had specially got up to watch, went out one by one, as the pale light of dawn slowly crept up from behind the dark green hills. That was beautiful, but actually the first glimpse of life I had in Hong Kong was a heavy boat crawling alongside the ship, rowed by two thin Chinese girls who were evidently finding the strain of it too much for their emaciated bodies. There were many such boats about (locally called *sampans*) and later on I was told that these were the water-dweller of Hong Kong, many of whom were born and would die on these boats without ever having slept a single night on *terra firma*.

As in Singapore, so in Hong Kong, I marvelled at the thoroughgoing way the British had cornered every strategically important spot in the world. They had Ceylon to protect the eastern route to India, as they had Gibraltar on the western route. They had Singapore to protect their mining interests in the Straits, and then they had Hong Kong (and a share in the international settlement of Shanghai) to ensure their position of strength in the Far East.

Hong Kong was then quite a typical colonial town, with its British garrison, and (shame on us) Indian Sikh and Gurkha policemen to maintain “law and order.”

Hong Kong was definitely a Chinese city, the vast majority of the population was Chinese, living under the Union Jack, but culturally as well as emotionally maintaining its Chinese character. Indeed, I came to know that, even if they paid taxes

to the British, their allegiance was to the Chinese republic—which was not surprising since only a few miles away was Canton, the biggest city of South China, which had only recently been subjected to Japanese bombardment. A striking demonstration was given on 7 July—a day before we were there—which was the first anniversary of the Lukouchiao Incident which started the present series of aggressions by Japan.

The day I was there, the excitement was still there, and special editions of the Chinese newspapers were brought out to mark the occasion. These also included news of the Indian ambulance unit which was going to China to express India's solidarity with China in the hour of her trial. This ambulance unit, consisting of five doctors, would later travel up to Yen-an, serve the Eighth Route Army of the Communists; Dr Dwarkanath Kotnis would marry a Chinese girl, and die in that far-off place; I would write a book about it—*And One Did Not Come Back!*—and Shantaram would make a memorable film based on it. But all this was to be in the future, and at that time no one had any inkling of it!

The Chinese were everywhere on the ship—on the deck playing games, in the swimming-pool, in the smoking-room, at the common piano. They had captured all the deck chairs and thus forced the white passengers to keep to their cabins. It was a most significant example of the "coloured" worn turning—a foretaste of things to come?

On the 10th day we arrived at Hongkew wharf and there the ship anchored a little distance from the quays. We were herded in a launch and taken to the Custom House jetty. An obliging *American Express* representative relieved me of the responsibility of my luggage.

When my luggage was delivered, I found that no taxis were available and I had my first—and last—rickshaw ride. I had heard about the Chinese rickshaw pullers and was appalled to look at the skeleton of an old man pulling a healthy young man like me. But since I did not know the language, and had no means to transport the luggage to the Foreign YMCA, I had to subdue my social sensibilities. The rickshaw man, meanwhile, was pulling it so fast in the midst of an alarming medley of trams, buses, rickshaws, bicycles, men, women and children, that my social conscience was overpowered by the primary

instinct of survival and self-preservation. At last I was at the YMCA building, and paid double what the rickshaw puller demanded which brought a smile to his old and wizened face. Then I lifted my suitcase and typewriter, and walked in.

Shanghai at that time was not one but several cities. First, there *was* the old Chinese city—*was* because by the time I reached there it was all in ruins—which was a part of the territory of the republican government. It was the terminus of the Shanghai-Nanking Railway, perhaps the most important railway station in the Far East. There was a Japanese flag flying on the ruined shell of the station building. Adjacent to this city, divided by a barbed wire fence, was the International Settlement, which was the strongest city in the whole world. (In a flash-forward you might have compared it to Berlin under the Four Powers—after World War Two). It was jointly controlled by the British, American, Chinese and Japanese—with representatives of all these diverse and mutually warring—elements on the Shanghai Municipal Council.

But in 1938, Shanghai was in the last phase of its cosmopolitan career. Besides the four nationalities already mentioned, there were nationals of almost every country resident there for China had been the happy hunting ground of the European capitalists. There were a large number of Germans, Portugese, Russians (mostly White Russians who fled their country after the revolution), and even some Indians. As invariably happened in all cities with such a mixed population—mostly composed of fortune-seekers, adventurers, profiteers and smugglers—the city acquired the vices of all, while maintaining the cultural and moral values of none. People who got rich quick by selling arms to bandits, teaching Chinese to eat or smoke opium (which was first given in the form of sweets), and by other more or less dubious methods, wanted to spend it quick, too. Shanghai came to be known among the world's leading "cities of sin."

I received the utmost help, advice and cooperation from many journalists, without whom I would have been floundering in the cess pool of Shanghai.

The Fabian Chows, a couple of rare talent and charm, were

more than journalists. The husband, then a young man of about twenty-five, was on the editorial staff of *North China Daily News*, a British-owned but moderately pro-Chinese newspaper. Fabian, being one of the few Chinese among the important members of the staff, was entrusted with the task of reviewing the war. He had recently been to Canton and turned out some vividly descriptive articles about the city which had been the target of Japanese bombers. Mrs Fabian Chow, also a journalist like her husband, was a representative of the new womanhood of China. Well educated, sociable and elegantly dressed, she was politically conscious and a social reformer.

There were others—among them there was C.D. Alcott, the hardboiled, overworked, perspiring American journalist, and we had a frank and far-ranging talk over cups of coffee in the cafeteria of the YMCA.

Quite a contrast with C.D. Alcott was young Woodhead of Reuters, the son of H.G.W. Woodhead, the editor of *Oriental Affairs* and *China Year Book*. It was Woodhead who confirmed my impression that Chinese guerillas were active against the Japanese army in Shanghai city itself, and the sound of artillery and machine gun-fire that I could hear at night was a definite indication that Japanese control had been established only in name.

On the third day I was to leave for Japan—and, half an hour before, the *American Express* representative, a Chinese young called Zee, handed me a bunch of anti-Japanese newspapers and posters that he had secured from somewhere for me. I did not know what to do with them, read them quickly and discard them, or to take them into the Nipponese ship, and across Nipponese territory, and risk discovery, and possible arrest. Then I had a brainwave.

At the Garden Bridge, at dawn, our taxi was stopped. A Highlander and a Sikh soldier were rather sulkily guarding this outpost of the British empire. On the other side of the bridge, which spans a narrow dirty creek, were three alert and rather nastily looking Japanese soldiers with rifles and fixed bayonets. They thoroughly examined our car and made sure there was no Chinese terrorist hidden anywhere, under the seat, or in the bonnet.

This was Hongkew and the Japanese flag which flew over

every ruined building reminded you that you were in the Empire of the Rising Sun.

The cabin was good and clean, the stewards smart and polite—over-polite! My cabin fellows were a junior British consulate official going to the Japanese Alps for a holiday, and a French wine merchant from Shanghai going to Tokyo for business.

At lunch and later on at tea and dinner, we three found ourselves sharing our table with a young lady of rather vivacious and exotic appearance. She said she was a White Russian, was most inquisitive about our plans, suggested hotels where we must stay in Japan, but would not tell us anything about herself except that she was going to Japan to escape the unbearable heat of Shanghai. The French man later on told me that he was sure he had seen her in one of the dance halls of Shanghai as a taxi-dancer. Next morning we overheard her talking to an official in Japanese, though the previous evening she had told us she did not know the language at all. We had, of course, no proof except the exotic mystery which seemed to surround her, but I liked to think that she was a spy, a Mata Hari. Was she? After more than forty years I am still wondering.

After dinner we were subjected to Japanese propaganda through a newsreel. We were shown Japanese troops in action, bombers starting out for their bit of devilish work, Chinese cities in ruins, the Rising Sun flag everywhere. Even the Japanese did not relish the after-dinner entertainment very much and sat in dumb silence.

Next morning before we reached Nagasaki, the port where I had to catch a train to Kobe, we were subjected to a strict customs examination. All my things—clothes, books, magazines, shoes, chappals—were taken out of the suitcase, the bottom of the suit case—was thoroughly examined lest there be a false bottom, I was asked questions about the book I carried, including Jawaharlal Nehru's *Autobiography* which I described as "literature" and got away with it. They pulled out all my shoes out of their paper wrappings, examined the heels, whether something was hidden in them, but they paid no attention to the waste paper in which they were wrapped. Afterwards they just as carefully packed them back in the crumpled anti-Japanese newspapers and posters, without giving

them a second look, and put them back in the suitcase. I heaved a sigh of relief, locked the suitcase, had it chalked by the customs inspector, and went out to look at Nagasaki.

It was then that I noticed that, besides many Japanese soldiers, we were also carrying the urns carrying the ashes of those who had died in the "struggle for Asian co-prosperity" as the war is euphemistically called in Japan. The quay was lined by soldiers and the members of the Women's Patriotic League who had come to pay their homage to the dead heroes.

But I was looking beyond them to the beautiful location of Nagasaki. It was all little red-tiled houses in a setting of green fields and lowlying hills—looked like a Japanese water colour showing a picture of idyllic peace. It was impossible to imagine that, in less than five years, the little red-roofed houses would be struck down by an atom bomb, and the ships in the harbour would go up like matchboxes!

Kobe, which I reached by train from Nagasaki, was strewn with the debris of fallen houses as if it had been recently "shanghai-ed" by aerial bombing. But the Chinese had made only one non-violent raid on Japanese cities, when their planes dropped leaflets and not bombs. The disaster in Kobe was the visitation of a natural calamity—a flood, a deluge. But the loss was so great that Japan had to postpone the Olympic Games and the World Exposition. Already superstitious folk in towns and villages were whispering and muttering. They were wondering whether the visitation of nature's fury was not divine justice meted out for the wrong done to China. The relief work was being done in Kobe with remarkable efficiency by private citizens who volunteered in their thousands. The Indian community, under the leadership of Mr A.M. Sahay, president of the Indian National Committee of Japan, had volunteered to make their substantial contribution of money as well as men.

In Kobe I met the first pro-Fascist Indians whose anti-Britishism had made them very susceptible to Fascist propaganda. It was not surprising that a few years later, Netaji Subhas Bose would have to go, by submarine, all the way from Germany to Japan to start his Indian National Army.

After I had moved from the hotel to the India Lodge which

was an excellent institution run mainly for Indian students in Kobe, I found that many of them were imbibing totalitarian concepts of Japan and even supporting Japan's aggressive policy in China. After listening to them I realized how easily Indian patriots were impressed by the militarist paraphernalia of uniforms, parades and flags and how necessary it was for us to guard against our national movement degenerating into a tail of Fascism.

I was sorry to reach Tokyo several months too late for the Cherry Blossom season. With Fujiyama and geishas, cherry blossoms are traditionally regarded as a national institution of Japan. These delicate white flowers shooting out of bare leafless branches, have been the motif of many decorative water colours.

Travelling from Kobe to Tokyo, I saw the fair land, every inch irrigated, with Fujiyama which dominated the countryside. But I didn't see any flowers. No wonder they don't grow along the railway track. Personally I am no poet and would rather have two factories to ensure a good standard of living to the workers than a garden for the idle rich to browse in. I saw wooden poles carrying cheap electricity to the remotest villages. But I also noticed Japanese farmers, men and women, with funny bamboo leaf hats on their heads, working in rice fields, and dragging the ploughs themselves. There is a shortage of livestock in Japan.

The glorification of the martial spirit finds its climax in the Yasukuni Jinja, which approximates to the tomb of the unknown soldier. Here the souls of all the heroes of Japan who have died for their country since the Russo-Japanese war are said to reside. Parties of students were sent here to worship at that shrine so that they, too, may be inspired to do similar deeds. It was, indeed, a solemn place and as I stood there, and uncovered my head to honour the dead, I was filled with pacifist, rather than patriotic, sentiments. I sympathized with the soldiers who had to die in the cause of imperialism or militarism.

Most of the time that we were on S.S. *Hikawa Maru*, crossing the Pacific to Canada and USA, the weather was dull and cold, and the only diversion was the two Tuesdays (both 26 July), the geographical phenomenon whereby we gained an

extra day of life! Not that we made any use of it! The sea was very rough and the ship was tossed about by mighty waves and we bitterly thought of the man who had called this the Pacific Ocean. Then a thick fog descended which continued for days and even the lifeboat drill which was held on a particularly stormy, chilly and foggy morning, provided brief but welcome interlude.

The passengers were quite an assorted company—Japanese, American, Canadian, Englishmen, White Russians, and one more Indian beside myself. Three police officers from Shanghai—two Canadian and one Englishman—were proceeding home on leave. They all tried to look like Bulldog Drummond, and religiously read Edgar Wallace and “Sapper.” The most interesting, however, were two American youths, a girl and a boy, who were in a group of exchange students sent to the University of Lingnam at Canton. During the year of the war and air-raids, most of their compatriots returned to the USA but these two brave souls stayed on till the end of the term.

From them I learnt for the first time about the Chinese Communists. I had read Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China* but they had actually met some of them and spoke in glowing terms of the great role played by the Red Army, not only in keeping the invaders at bay but in creating social consciousness among the mass of Chinese peasants.

There were several missionaries—mostly ladies—on board, and one of them was concerned about saving my soul. I had to play hide-and-seek with her in the diningroom for she lost no opportunity to impress upon me the terrible consequences of not following the way of Christ. Cornered, I once told her that I considered myself a truer follower of Christ than many of those who preached Christianity and practised imperialism. But she naively insisted that we keep politics apart!

Half the passengers, including the missionary lady, were getting down at Vancouver, Canada. Seattle in the USA was the next stop for me to get down in the New World. My mind was full of keen anticipation. America, here I come!

18. The New Columbus!

"Hello, brother!" I received a thump on the back. I turned and looked at the first American I met in America. He was a reporter-cum-photographer and had somehow discovered that I belonged to his fraternity, and proceeded to introduce himself in that forthright manner that was typical of his profession as well as of his country.

His appearance, however, belied all notions that I had of American newspapermen. He was no cigar-chewing, expensively dressed handsome young reporter of the movies. He was more than middle-aged, and in his shabby appearance and wild hair he rather resembled the late Mr Jhabwala, the Bombay trade unionist. After questioning me about my academic qualifications, he exclaimed. "Oh, I am a graduate, too," and when a friendly customs inspector banteringly interjected, "Yale or Harward?" he promptly replied, "I graduated from the sidewalks of New York!" In a reminiscent mood he added, "Oh, yes, Sir. I even know fashionable New York. I sold newspapers of Fifth Avenue when I was a kid." I have seldom met any one with such obvious pride in his proletarian origin. I asked him if he was born in New York, what was he doing in Seattle, four thousand miles away. He said, "Depression, my friend, depression. Have you no depression in your country?"

I said, "We are so depressed and suppressed that we need no depression to depress us further."

Having taken my photograph, leaning against the customs enclosure for his "Arrivals and Departures" column, he departed—dragging his load of camera case and tripod, his seedy raincoat flying in the wind—a mocking caricature of American "prosperity" and high living standards.

I was advised by a fellow passenger to convert my first class ticket to New York via Los Angeles to third class and thereby

save more than a hundred dollars. That afternoon, as I took the train which would carry me to Los Angeles, I bought the evening paper and was surprised to see myself on the cover page, complete with my words in quotes: "In India we are so depressed and suppressed that we need no depression to depress us further" Thanks, brother, for not misquoting me like the Japanese reporter who, after a polite how-do-you-do had written "Mr. K.A. Abbas, Indian correspondent, expressed *pleasure and surprise* (emphasis mine—K.A.A.) at the conditions in Japan. . . ."

In setting foot in Seattle instead of New York, I was "discovering" America from the wrong angle. There I would have been greeted by the billion-dollar Statue of Liberty holding aloft her torch, while here I was greeted by a bedraggled journalist holding aloft his flashlight apparatus. Expensive symbolism and living reality! Somehow the sight of men in Seattle walking about in rags, crippled ex-soldiers begging in the streets by the traditional method of selling matches, slum children with hollowed cheeks working as shoeshine boys, came as a distinct shock to me. Perhaps the New Columbus made a mistake in getting down at Seattle and not in New York.

The huge locomotive that was pulling our train carried a big bell on the top which went clanging all the way and it reminded me of the romantic, pioneering past of America—early railroads penetrating the forest, and herds of untamed cattle frightened out of their wits by this iron monster with a clanging bell. The landscape we were passing through was conducive to such thoughts—miles upon miles of pine-covered hills with their untold wealth of timber, huge lumber factories and sawmills after every few miles, big cattle ranches with cowboys riding picturesquely on horseback, dairy farms, sheep farms, fields or corn . . . this looked more like the Country of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln than Ford America.

Next morning, when we entered the state of California, we were still in the picturesque pine area. The locomotive puffed up the slopes, took the train through seemingly endless tunnels, and there was Mount Shasta in all its snow-covered majesty. The Californians in the train patriotically enthused over it, while the non-Californians poohpoohed it as "that anthill, you mean." It seems that parochial loyalties and prejudices are

as strong in America as in India!

As the train rolled on through fertile but uninhabited land, I wondered why petty racial considerations must keep out more people from migrating here and utilizing the abundant resources of nature. It is "God's own country" and there was space enough for Red Indian, American, as well as the immigrant from Europe and Asia! As we roared our way to the south and, after negotiating a patch of arid desert, came in the neighbourhood of Los Angeles, we saw huge fruit orchards—oranges, peaches, apples. There is enough fruit in California for the whole of America to eat but the profit motive system decrees that thousands of tons of fruits be left to rot rather allow the price to come down!

Hollywood! The very name spelt glamour and romance to millions of film fans all over the world. But I have just finished reading Cedric Belfrage's *The Promised Land* which debunks Hollywood and exposes the reality behind the facade. "From this quaint suburb are exported to the world Hollywood kiss close-ups, twaddle and glycerine tears, filling Hollywood pockets with gold and the minds of humanity with libidinous or no thoughts at all"—thus he sums up Hollywood. I was, therefore, prepared to be disillusioned. There is no railway station by the name of Hollywood. As my train steamed into Los Angeles railway station, another train came in on the opposite side. As I stepped out, I noticed a small group of reporters, photographers and publicity men surrounding a little curly-haired girl—Shirley Temple. Two hours later, when I looked at the afternoon paper at the downtown YMCA Shirley Temple's return from a holiday tour was blazoned on the front pages, and the small group at the station was now magnified into "a huge crowd of fans and admirers." Hollywood, thy first name is Publicity!

Shirley Temple was getting some other kind of adverse publicity, too. She had been named before Senator McCarthy's committee on un-American activities, for she had sent her autographed photograph to some Russian children who had written a letter to her after seeing some movie of hers. And that was the mood of the anti-communists in America at that moment—not to spare even a totally apolitical child star!

As was usual with me throughout this tour, one introduction led to another, taking me into familiar and unfamiliar situations. I had a letter to Doctor Markovin, the head of the department of cinematography at the University of Southern California. The doctor proved to be a jolly old soul, full of cordiality, and he introduced me to Ram Bagai, a favourite student of his. He was Indian by origin but had lived all his life in California as his parents had migrated there from north-western Punjab when he was a child. Within an hour I and Bagai were like old friends, I drove in his car to his flat where he lived with his mother, a Punjabi lady, who was glad to meet someone from the old country. Ram had an *entree* to most of the studios and it was with him that I saw some of them—larger and better-equipped, but basically the same as the better of our own film studios in Bombay or Madras. I saw *Gunga Din* in making and was able to warn the RKO Radio that this kind of imperialist nonsense would not be appreciated in India.

I also broadcast a talk over a radio station, KMPC—"the station of the stars"—and called it "Hello, Hollywood" in which I gave the greetings of their Indian fans to all the popular stars—not only to Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, James Stewart and Tyrone Power, Mickey Rooney and Shirley Temple, but to Paul Muni whose pictures had earned him not only popularity but also the respect of the Indian cinegoers. The talk ended on a stinging note, as I attacked the series of anti-Indian films they had produced, ending with the then current production of "*Gunga Din*." "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Hollywood, for slandering a friendly people through your films. Nationalist India will never forgive you, for you are not only hurting our nationalism but betraying the democratic traditions of your own country."

The meeting with Syed Hosain was brief but pleasant. I had met him in Bombay at Mr Brelvi's house, when he had come for a short visit after a decade in USA. There was a sad romance attached to him and why he had to leave the country and settle abroad, otherwise he would have been one of nationalist India's ablest editors and orators, perhaps even a national leader.

Though already middle-aged then, he was still handsome and one immediately knew why women fell for him. He had been doing journalism and lecturing in America on Indian affairs, and was now a professor at the University of Southern California where he taught Indian history and civilization. It was a pleasure to lunch with him as he was a brilliant conversationalist and a keen student of international affairs.

But the highlight of my stay in Los Angeles was the meeting I had with Upton Sinclair in Pasadena, one of the suburbs of Los Angeles. Since my school days I have kept a selected list of authors I would like to meet personally. Every now and then names are struck off this selected list and new ones added. With G.K. Chesterton gone, very few authors were left although high on the list was the name of Upton Sinclair, ever since in my high school days when I had eagerly read his *Jungle* and, later on, his *Book of Love*.

Sinclair, who was waiting for us at his home, turned out to be American edition of Mahatma Gandhi. Of course he was not an so short and thin, nor was he clothed in a loin cloth. But he had the same penetrating eyes behind the glasses and the same air of unaffected simplicity. He was dressed in a cheap pair of linen trousers and an undervest, the most sensible clothes to wear in the heat of the California summer. We (I and Bagai) felt overdressed in our carefully pressed suits and collars and ties.

Within a few minutes, however, we had removed our coats, opened our collars, and were lounging on wicker chairs in a shady corner of the garden, sipping iced orange juice which he had thoughtfully kept ready for us. It was difficult to imagine that this unassuming obliging man, showing such consideration to an unknown young Indian journalist, was the author of sixty best sellers, each of which had run into several editions, and had been translated into practically every known language.

An anti-fascist league had strong supporters in Hollywood, and the movie colony had been very prominent in sending relief to loyalist forces in Spain. Vittorio Mussolini, the son of the Italian dictator, had to leave without completing the fascist film which he had come to produce.

In the years to come, some of Hollywood's most creative talent would be hounded out of the movie colony and branded

as un-American. Some would prefer to migrate to Europe, where they would face voluntary poverty, while others would rat on their colleagues and suffer from guilt complexes and frustrations. But already, even in 1938, I could feel the presence of an increasing number of socially conscious individuals in the movie business who refused to live up to the Hollywood reputation of intellectual inertia.

The Poughkeepsie Youth Congress for Peace was held too late for the three dictators had already decided on their course of aggression, and made a beginning—in Abyssinia, in China, in Spain, in Sudetenland and in Austria.

It is, indeed, possible to be cynical about the youth rally which was inaugurated at New York Municipal Stadium on Randall's Island where fifty-four delegations marched past the saluting base and standing ovations were given to the Spanish, the Chinese and the Czech delegations. As our own group marched past, with the only girl in our delegation, Renu Roy (now a member of Parliament), carrying the national tricolour, above the rumble of applause came a shout from a corner of the stadium, "Good old Gandhi!" Welcoming the delegates on behalf of the city, Mayor La Guardia (who was credited with having given New York a progressive and clean administration, turning out the racketeers) roared in a powerful speech, "If the youth of the world want no war, there should be no war." Unfortunately, in less than a year, the war which we were all so eager to stop was upon us.

But, nevertheless, the next nine days that five hundred of us (from fifty-four countries) spent at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie (seventy miles up the Hudson river), were the most exciting nine days that we could have cheerfully traveled halfway round the world for. One of the delegates I remember was Yang Wen-ming, eighteen-year old Chinese heroine. A year before when four hundred Chinese soldiers were holding out against heavy Japanese artillery fire in a warehouse in Shanghai, this girl repeatedly risked her life to carry messages to the soldiers who, through her help, were ultimately saved. (Is she living now, a self-satisfied matron as an emigrant in America, or was she killed in the war?)

As a contrast, there was huge Kalibala from Uganda, a graduate of Columbia University, who electrified the entire gathering by his outspoken remark that the real savages were not his people, the tribal Negroes, but the white militarists who gloried in mass murders. (What is he doing now? Teaching in some university? A diplomat or a minister occupying a seat of power—or maybe only a grave?)

There were Teresa Beltran and Marguerita Robles, young peasant girls from Spain, whose work at that time alternated between fighting at the Front and carrying on a literacy campaign among peasants and workers. (Are they alive today, have they survived the terror that was let loose in their country by Franco and his Fascists against all the progressives?)

Among the large number of delegates who came to attend the Congress at great personal sacrifice was Ishabel Ricker, then a slip of a girl from Western Canada, who hitch hiked and walked miles to reach Poughkeepsie.

From South Africa came a newly wedded couple on a strange honeymoon—Doctor Max Joffe and his bride, Saura' Leslie. Whites themselves, they lodged a strong protest against their government refusing a passport to a Negro delegate who was elected as a member of their party. (How and where, actually and ideologically, are Doctor and Mrs Joffe today?)

Palestine (there was no Israel then) was represented by a Jew and an Arab, but strangely (or not so strangely) enough Joshua Leibner and Rey Khouri both indicated imperialism for the present troubles in Palestine, instead of accusing each other. (Do they face each other across the barricades now? Is Rey Khouri living in a camp of Palestinian refugees?)

It was a variegated delegation from Great Britain—from the communist John Golan who extended his hand of friendship to the youth of the fascist countries, the socialist Margaret Gale who condemned imperialism and named her country as “the word offender” to three Churchill conservatives who mildly defended the Chamberlain foreign policy. (How and where are they now?)

The smallest country represented was Haiti (the original America that Columbus discovered) whose delegate, Laura Cadet, certainly put her little country on the map of the youth world and revealed how the far-flung ramifications of fascism

threatened the independent little countries of America like the three million residents of the republic of Haiti. She told me that if she ever became the president of her republic, she would invite me. Thirty-seven years later, I am still waiting for that invitation!

And, lastly, there was our own Yusuf Meherally who put forth such a strong case against British rule in India that, among the British delegates, the liberals felt uncomfortable and the few conservatives went red in the face. I was given a chance to speak on the last day of the Congress, and I remember I made it clear that, while Indians were wholeheartedly for peace and collective security, and quoted from Nehru and Gandhi, the greatest danger to peace was from imperialism which must be ended here and now, in India as elsewhere. This evoked an outburst of applause but, afterwards I was told I had gone beyond the official line which was not to press for the independence of countries like India, presumably to keep conservatives like Churchill in the camp of anti-fascists! I was not sorry to have transgressed the official "line!"

I had my first introduction to yoga in America in Los Angeles, that town of strange churches and spiritual fads, where I found half a dozen swamis busy saving the souls of Americans. I was taken to one of their temples which looked like a mosque, the arched doorway and windows were Saracenic, the lattice work was plagiarized from the Taj Mahal, and a big Chinese chandelier threw the entrance hall into "dramatic" light and shade so conducive to a spiritual gathering. To complete the oddly matched atmosphere, on the walls were pictures of rishis and holy men of the Himalayas. The "swami" turned out to be a smart young man in a flowing white robe and a rather amateurishly tied turban; he was indeed like Ramon Novarro in the *Son of India* (which began with the title "Abdel Karim was the son of a high-caste Hindu. . .").

In New York I was to meet a man who seemed to think that yoga could be made into a business proposition. He was a hotel-owner cum physical-culturist cum student of yoga who lived on an estate in the suburbs of New York. A pseudo-oriental atmosphere pervaded his hotel—statues of Buddha and Persian carpets! He was a typical cigar-chewing American businessman.

"Yep," he said, "there is a great scope for yoga in this country. But one must organize it properly. Send me a swami from India with a big name and see what I can do with him. I see a huge net work of yoga centres for spiritual as well as physical healing, yoga magazines, yoga restaurants for vegetarian food, yoga camps for the holidays . . . Gee, there are millions in it, if it is properly organized."

This was in 1938, as recorded in my travel diary. After thirty-five years, I wonder if the recent visit of Swami Muktanand to America is not the fulfilment of that American businessman's dream. Here is a genuine man of spiritual perception who can be fully exploited in the manner perscribed, for spiritual unrest has grown rather than lessened in "God's Own Country." Material progress, without any moral, ethical or ideological values, has proved insufficient. You cannot worship mammon for ever: Sometimes, the dissatisfied American turns to the first oriental religion he hears of—it maybe Bahaism from Iran or Transcendental Meditation from India.

The Negro situation in America has radically changed since I was there in 1938. But if it has changed, signs of impending change were evident even then. I was myself a victim of racial discrimination when a woman, suspecting me to be "coloured," refused to sit on the same table in a dining car on the train. Later, when she knew I was not a Negro, she said she had no objection but I refused, saying that now I had objection to sharing the table with her! That made me a hero to at least half of my fellow passengers.

I had occasion to come into contact with the soul-searing bitterness of the Negroes against their white exploiters and persecutors. Along with the Indian and African delegates to the World Youth Congress, I attended a dinner given in our honour by the Ethiopian World Federation and some other Harlem Negro organization. It was a huge gathering and we were touched by the hospitality and friendliness of these people.

One of the speakers at this dinner poured fire and thunder into his words—he was the embodiment of the spirit that, later, produced the phenomenon of the Black Panthers and the Symbionese Liberation Army. He invited us to join a coloured front against all white people and said in so many words that

when we gained ascendancy we should do to the white races exactly what they had done to us. This remark was greeted with tremendous applause. It was my turn to speak next. I sensed the delicate position in which I was placed. Should I risk courting the displeasure of this "black" audience by disagreeing with the previous speaker, or should I betray my convictions by pandering to a coloured edition of chauvinism?

I began on safe ground by expressing the sympathy and support of nationalist India for Ethiopia and assuring the American Negroes that we were with them in their struggle for the attainment of complete political, social and economic equality in their country. Then I ventured to ask them if they had ever cared to probe the causes which were responsible for the present condition of Negroes in America, for the subjection of India, for the invasion of Ethiopia, for the suppression of coloured races in Africa, for the rape of Manchuria and Austria and for the present Japanese invasion of China.

I dared to suggest it was not a question of colour at all. Otherwise why should white complexioned Nazis be persecuting equally white complexioned Jews? Why should the "yellow" Japanese be overrunning the territory of "yellow" Chinese? Briefly I stated the historical interrelation between imperialism, militarism, capitalism and fascism. I asked "Are we going to inflict one more evil in the world by letting loose a coloured imperialism?" I was relieved to hear at least a few voices replying "No."

We are going to fight injustice, I said, whatever from it takes. All those who are victims of injustice—be they black, white or yellow—are our friends and comrades, all those who are instruments of injustice, irrespective of their complexion, are our enemies. There was some applause, though not as vociferous as my predecessor had received.* And I sat down, assured that I had not made myself too unpopular in Harlem.

The Negroes taught me self-respect. Again and again I would meet some boy or girl of pure white complexion who would surprise me with the statement that he or she was a Negro. It seems that in America, any one with even a drop of Negroid blood is not only not ashamed of being known as a Negro but is definitely proud of it.

My last night in New York. I was out with a few friends, talking while pub-crawling—though every time my friends ordered whisky or beer I ordered a cup of tea or coffee. By the morning I had consumed eighteen cups of tea and coffee.

The result was that as soon as I was on board *Normandie*, the largest ship afloat in the world, I went to my cabin,—the only passenger in a cabin of four,—lay down on the bed and was soon asleep.

Thus the New Columbus once again missed seeing the Statue of Liberty as we steamed out of New York harbour. I did not know at that time why at the last moment three-fourths of the passengers had cancelled their departure by the S.S. *Normandie*. Only later, when I got up, did I learn of the panicky rumour in New York that war had already broken out in Europe. But it was a false alarm, anticipating the war by at least ten months.

19. Europe on the Brink

By the time I woke up in my cabin, we were far out in the ocean. New York was but a blurred outline and the Statue of Liberty was only a speck in the distance.

My mind cleared by sleep, I wondered about the empty berths and the mystery was solved by a newspaper in the trash can on the deck as I came out for a stroll. The afternoon newspaper (which start coming out at 10 a.m.) had this scary headline blazoned on the front page: WAR IN EUROPE? No wonder three-fourths of the passengers cancelled their passage at the last minute. Who cared to notice the question mark or gave it any importance?

During the voyage, the threat of war was the only topic of conversation. The next day a rumour gained currency that war had actually been declared, but that the ship's authorities were holding back the news for fear of creating a panic. They knew the majority of passengers would insist on the ship turning back and landing them in New York, while the ship, which was French, was anxious to reach France.

On board we had Ernest Hemingway, the American author, who was fighting for the International Brigade in Spain and had been to the United States for a lecture and fund-raising tour. He was almost arrested when he boarded the steamer as he was carrying a plane with him, bought with American donations and no one was sure whether it was legal cargo or not. But, after a lot of arguments, they gave Ernest the benefit of the doubt.

Also on board was Julien, "the Black Eagle," a Negro aviator and adventurer, who fought for Black Abyssinia against fascist Italy, and now talked of enlisting in the French air force to fight Hitler.

They were both first class passengers and, according to the caste system of the ship, we were segregated from them, or they

were segregated from us. There were so few passengers in the first class that Hemingway often came to our economy class dining-room for a glass of beer—actually I should say a series of bottles of beer. An American art student going to Paris for the first time, who was in the next cabin to mine, one day invited me to join some American youngsters who were sitting and listening to Hemingway. I remember Ernest as a big, burly man, with a thick red moustache (much like a colonel in the army), who was full of the anti-fascist war in Spain—which he called “the dress rehearsal” for the bigger European war which was coming in a matter of months if not weeks! He not only gesticulated with his powerful hands, but drew a map of Europe on the paper napkin and demonstrated how Hitler would deploy his divisions by moving the empty beer bottles. I tried to make him say something about literature, but he haughtily replied that at the moment he could only talk of war. “We have to write literature with our blood, young men,” I remember him telling us.

I and the American art student became friends and, since both were on their first visit to Paris and neither had much money, we decided to stick together. On the last day of the voyage, we asked an American who had often been to Paris to recommend a cheap hotel and he promptly replied, “Hotel Champs Elysees. That’s the place for you.”

We got down at Le Havre where we bid goodbye to the world’s largest steamer (which was to go down to the bottom of the Atlantic a year later) and took the train to Paris.

By the time we arrived in Paris it was dusk, but were we thrilled? To be young and in Paris! Wasn’t that the ultimate pleasurable human experience? But when we came out and were besieged by a horde of taxidivers, we tested our first phrase of French by asking everyone. “*Parlez vous Anglaise?*” (Do you speak English?) One driver in a bert replied, “*Oui, oui, monsieur?*” We were happy to get into his taxi and when we asked him to drive us to the Hotel Champs Elysees (we had learnt the correct pronunciation—*Shaan-ze-lize*) he beamed with happy surprise. “*Oui, oui, Hotel Champs Elysees !*”

Then he drove like a mad man—as all Parisian taxidivers do—we were scared but we did not like to look unsophisticated

enough to protest. At last we arrived at the hotel but it did not look like my idea of "a cheap hotel"—it was an all marble-and-glass-and-chromium affair.

The cabdriver, taking his fare and a big tip, thanked us in French, wished us a pleasant holiday (so we guessed—he did not know a word of English) and departed. Meanwhile, a bell-boy from the hotel had picked up our cases and taken them in. I looked at my partner. He shrugged his shoulders and said in his nasal twang, "What the hell? I guess for one night we can afford it!"

We found ourselves in a double room (it was cheaper than two single rooms) and, after a luxurious bath and shave, we changed into our best clothes, and decided to make a night of it.

"Where shall we go?" I asked, as we sauntered down the Champs Elysees.

"Folies Bergere," replied my friend. "Either we go tonight, or by tomorrow we will be too blase to look at it, or too broke to afford it."

So we went to the Place Pigalle district and bought two high priced tickets. (At the then current rate of exchange it did not cost us much in dollars). The show of semi-nude and nude females on parade looked to us like a beef shop, the skinned, dead cows dancing about, with a fixed smile on their faces. We found that the place was full of American, British, European and even a few Indian tourists—there were hardly any Parisians present. Everybody appeared to be bored, but had to stay on to get his money's worth.

The next day we contacted some Indian friends, and on their advice moved to a *pension* in the Latin Quarter near the Boulevard St. Michel and the University of Sorbonne. The daily rent of my little room (without bathroom) was the equivalent of one and a half rupees. Since the room was "furnished" with a (broken) spring bed and a table and one chair, with a wash basin, it was cheaper than a similar room one could get in Bombay. My American friend rented a studio-bedroom on the top floor by paying double what I was paying, which was less than a dollar per day.

In Paris we were not free from war tension. There was incessant talk of mobilization, train loads of soldiers were leaving

for the frontier—the supposedly impregnable Maginot Line—every day, and every home and hotel, including our *pension*, displayed printed instructions to follow in the case of a sudden airraid. At the travel agencies, tourists added the proviso “If the frontiers are not closed by then” when making plans for a tour of central Europe. And an ominous silence fell on a group of us, foreigners, when the guide taking us round the city in a bus, pointed to a church on which some of the shells from the German “Big Berthas” had landed during the last war. Everyone thought with a shudder: It might happen again—with bigger shells (and bombs) from “Bigger Berthas!”

And now the man who was solely responsible for creating this uneasiness and tension was going to speak. The speech for which we had so anxiously waited in that cafe on Montparnasse, even as it was being anxiously scanned in the chancelleries of Europe, came to many as a bit of an anti-climax though it certainly relieved the high pitch of tension and sent peacefully to sleep many uneasy heads which had been dreading an immediate declaration of war. Highly strung women with husbands or sons in the army burst into tears of joy. The only thing that mattered that night was that we had still some more days of peace and, momentarily relieved of our anxiety, there was a general exodus from the streets. Soon the music halls and cabarets were crowded and cafes rang with laughter as the strains of *Marseilles* broke through a medley of gay music.

Read in the disillusioning light of day, Hitler's speech gives little cause for enthusiasm. The dogs of war were not unleashed—yet. The zero hour had only been postponed.

The night's brief moment of relief was already wearing off as the ominous implications of Hitler's words became more apparent. The afternoon papers announced another serious “incident.” Once again there were uneasy, anxious faces on the gay boulevards of Paris.

Paris was undoubtedly one of the most cultured towns in the world. In London and Berlin, in Rome and New Delhi, roads and streets were invariably named after rulers, generals and bureaucrats (It is only now that there is a Tansen Marg and Tolstoy Lane in New Delhi.) In Paris you found places named after philosophers, thinkers and poets. In the Pantheon,

memorials have been put up not only to the heroes who fought for the French Revolution but also to those whose writings inspired this great rising of the people. Nor did Paris recognize national barriers in honouring literary celebrities. If there were roads named after Rousseau and Voltaire and Zola and Balzac, there were also Rue Shakespeare and Boulevard Haussman. For centuries Paris had been the haven of refuge for revolutionary writers and thinkers and artists from all over the world. It was the only place where the coloured man might feel at home—free from discriminatory treatment. Ho Chi Minh (I now recall) not only studied in Paris but helped to establish the French Communist Party.

It was a paradox, this Paris. The Place de la Bastille, the site where the notorious prison stood, had no memorial. An open square bore testimony to the revolutionary will of a people. Visible memorials to revolutionary and republican writers stood in the shadow of royal palaces, the monstrously ugly structure of the Eiffel Tower (built there by an American company to advertize the durability of its steel) dwarfed the noble dome of the Pantheon. The Metro trains thundered under the foundations of the Louvre. Wine was served free with meals but a carafe of water cost quite a lot. And pornographic pictures were openly sold not far from the Cathedral of Notre Dame!

Whatever else might be said against the League of Nations, it could not be denied that its home (now the home of the International Labour Office and the World Health Organization of the UNO) was situated in idyllic surroundings. Set on the shores of a beautiful lake, with green hills as a background, enjoying a bracing climate, the capital of a truly neutral Switzerland, Geneva was a happy choice, much better than smog-enveloped New York where the CIA keeps all the participants in the UNO under its constant surveillance.

When I went there in 1938, De Valare, with his prominent nose and his gleaming spectacles, was the President of the League of Nations, and it was amusing to reflect that British delegates had to submit to the authority of an ex-rebel.

To this gathering of bored, complacent and blase diplomats—including the trio of knighted “Indian” delegates (N.N. Sircar, Shanmukham Chetty and Sultan Ahmed who took their cue

from the leader of the British delegation) the speeches of the Chinese and the Spanish delegates were in the nature of a rude shock. As Dr Wellington Koo and Senor Dal Nayo indicted the League for its criminally apathetic attitude towards their martyred countries, I watched the reactions of the delegates. Not a trace of emotion. They might have as well been listening to a balance sheet at a company directors' meeting. What struck me as the limit of hypocrisy was the way in which, one after another, the delegates went up to the Chinese and Spanish spokesmen and congratulated them on their speeches—as if it was a school debating society. I left the meeting in disgust.

Then in the lift going down I met the one person whom I wanted to meet, who had promised to meet me, and who could enlighten me about this “dead bird, new cage,” as a Spanish delegate had called the League of Nations, quoting a proverb of his country. I met Jawaharlal Nehru.

20. "Have You Got Your Gas Mask?"

"Better see Italy first because soon it may be too late," Jawaharlal Nehru had advised me. And so from Geneva I bought a ticket to Milan.

The Duce himself welcomed me to Italy as our train crossed the Swiss frontier. His unsmiling face, grim out-thrust jaw, and hand raised in fascist salute, was blazoned on every station platform draped in flags.

This was the week of the final phase of the Czechoslovak crisis when the peace of Europe, of the whole world, hung in the balance. Signor Mussolini was then touring that very part of the country through which we were passing (hence the flags and the portraits galore) and had just then announced his solidarity with Nazi Germany.

With all my background of anti-Fascism, I had to admire Milan at first sight. Broad smooth roads, the impressive, modernistic buildings, the large factories, the glittering shops and department stores and, above all, the model houses for workers which were proudly shown to me by my enthusiastic guide. But Milan was only the deceptive showcase of Italy or, to vary the metaphor, the false teeth of Fascism. The air of prosperity which the city flaunted was restricted to the main business quarter, the model houses (I soon learnt) accommodated only a fraction of the working class, the factories were run on regimented labour which was not allowed to organize for collective bargaining.

Whatever illusions were created by Milan were finally entombed amidst the crumbling walls of Venice. A depressing air of forlorn decay hung over the city of Venice which was strangely reminiscent of some old Indian towns. Even the greenish water of the canals was putrid. What struck one as the dominant feature of Venice was the appalling, glaring poverty. Nowhere outside India had I seen such pitiable destitution. Groups of

unemployed men in rags hung about street corners, enviously eyeing the tourists. A "flash-forward" to the neo-realism of the films of Rossellini and De Sica—like *Open City*, *Bicycle Thieves* and *Miracle of Milan*!

While walking in the streets, by a lucky coincidence, I met an old friend Enver Kureishi (brother of Zahir Baba Kureishi who was my class fellow) who was on the way to England to study journalism. He had landed that very day by an Italian liner in Venice and was now proposing to travel overland to Paris and eventually to London. Together we planned to visit Rome about which we had read so much—about Michel Angelo and Leonardo Da Vinci—and we proposed to see the cathedrals and the art galleries, the fountain at Trevi and the Vatican. But all these remained our dreams. As we went to the American Express to buy our tickets for Rome, it seemed all the American and British tourists were anxious to go back to Paris. Being "British subjects by birth," as we were described on our passports, even we were very seriously advised to return to Paris by that evening's train before the frontiers would be closed. I did not see Rome then—or ever!

We managed to buy tickets, but the train was chock-full, and we had "standing room only" all the way to Paris!

Again, while crossing into neutral Switzerland, Mussolini's face was the last we saw of fascist Italy—strong-jawed and defiant. Who could have imagined on that day of panic that in less than six years the bullet-ridden body of Mussolini would be hanged by Italians in a public square!

Back in France, our train was delayed several hours at various stations to allow troop trains to pass, "*Où allez vous?*" (Where are you going?) someone in our compartment asked, and one of the soldiers replied "Berlin!" in a tone which had more irony than humour in it.

In Paris, Enver and I went to Sen Lis to meet Louis Bromfield, the American author, whom I had met in Aligarh at the house of our vice-chancellor. Since then his novel of India, *The Rains Came* (for which he was then researching) had become one of the best sellers and was to be filmed soon after.

But it was not about novels and films that we talked, but about war and its consequences. He had sent away his wife and

children to America but had remained behind to watch developments. Having lived in France for many years, he looked upon the country as his second home, and he had offered his own services as well as his house and his cars to the government of France to be used for any purpose in the emergency of war. In journalistic circles in Paris, we had heard that in the event of war breaking out, Louis Bromfield would be sent to the United States to rouse public opinion in favour of joining the common war against Fascism.

Two old French ladies, Bromfield's neighbours, dropped in to talk with him. Their sons were in the Army and naturally they were anxious about their safety. It was raining outside and the leaden, grey skies seemed to portend impending doom. For a few moment there was tense silence. We—two Indians, two French women, and one American—linked together by the common danger of war, seemed to be waiting for something, anything, to happen.

And it did happen. The telephone rang. It was the American embassy calling. The news had just come over the wires that President Roosevelt had sent a strong personal message, appealing for peace, to the two dictators. Did F.D.R. know that, even if his message did not for long deter the dictators in their madness, it at least brought a ray of hope to two old French women, fearing for the lives of their sons, in a little village called Sen Lis.¹

A week later we were in London, the one place where an Indian is supposed to feel at home—despite the discrimination and the humiliation of the colour bar. As Chamberlain flew back and forth on his mission of appeasement, trenches were being dug in Hyde Park and everyone asked everyone else, "Have you got your gas mask?" (I was asked, too, and the next day I got my gas mask which I would carry back with me to India—as a reminder of the war that might have been and the war that might yet be!) Oblivious of the scanty protection that

¹"President Roosevelt has sent another message to Harr Hitler—a dignified, moving appeal in which the real point at issue is stressed. What a vast difference between what he says and how he says it and Mr Neville Chamberlain's pronouncements! Even the printed word of President Roosevelt shows that there is a man behind it." Jawaharlal Nehru in *China, Spain and War*.

this ugly, suffocating contraption¹ afforded against a really serious gas attack, the people, in their pitiful desperation, clung hopefully to their gas masks, like frightened children. It seemed to me that they were victims of a gigantic hoax and a fraud. Even after all the alarms and excursions, Mr Chamberlain's aerial trips, the trench digging and the distribution of gas masks, Czechoslovakia was betrayed according to the same timetable suggested three weeks earlier by the *Times*, the British Tory paper. Then why all this fuss and panic, this parade of balloon barrages, these anti-aircraft guns being rushed about in a corner of Hyde Park, and finally that invariable question, “Have you got your gas mask?”

Because, when the suggestion of cession of Czech territory to Germany was first mooted, there was general opposition to such treachery from every quarter in Britain. But now, when the housewives all over the country had been frightened by the alleged imminence of war, when the small man in trade and industry had been faced with the grim prospect of conscription and, incidentally, when munition manufacturers had “cleaned” billions of pounds by the patriotic service of “speeding up rearmament,” (“A strong Britain is the best guarantee of peace”—or so they said!)—now hardly a voice was raised against the shameless betrayal of a free people. The gas mask had choked the people into acquiescence.

While going for a stroll near Earl's Court station one night, we saw and heard the first British fascist. He was one of those “small men,” with a grudge against the world, who were invariably the first to join any movement of protest. They arrived at an aggressive political philosophy not from any intellectual conviction but from a general sense of grievance. The specimen we saw carried a chair with him on which he stood and harangued whatever little crowd he could gather. It was a fantasy of jumbled politics, the outpourings of an over-heated brain. But what he said was not without significance.

He began by painting a lurid, frightening picture of Soviet Russia, “revealed” how the Reds were carrying on underground

¹“I am pressed by people to get a gas mask. The idea seems ridiculous to me. Am I to go about with a snout with the appearance of a beast?” Jawaharlal Nehru in *China, Spain and War*.

political agitation in England, abused the Jews as being responsible for the degeneration of British youth, and declared that there was no reason why Britain should have fought for the "bastard state" of Czechoslovakia against Hitler who was a great lover of peace, and had saved Europe from the Bolshevik menace! "Thank God," he said in his peroration, "that we have a man like Chamberlain at the head of our country. He is doing exactly what Sir Oswald Mosley had all the time been saying."

And, then, rather illogically but very significantly, he concluded, "Remember that we have no quarrel with Germany or Italy. Remember that our enemies are only communists and Jews. Remember that our first loyalty is to His Majesty the King and, after him, to our leader, Oswald Mosley." Then he gave a fascist salute, jumped from the chair and, grabbing it, walked away. Three excited youngsters who had also raised their arms in salute followed him.

Chamberlain's Munich policy pursued me to Oxford to which I took a day's coach trip across the picturesque downs. The day I arrived was the one on which the most important Parliamentary byelection between Mr Lindsay, the Master of Balliol, and Mr Quinton Hogg, the Conservative candidate, was fought on the all-important issue of Chamberlain's Munich policy. Lindsay's supporters had worked up a most original and effective idea by displaying placards which read, "HITLER SAYS DON'T VOTE FOR LINDSAY."

The eyes of the whole country and even foreign countries were upon Oxford, for the byelection was to reveal whether there had been a noticeable changeover in public opinion after the Munich betrayal. And what was Oxford doing? A few politically conscious students could be seen working for either of the candidates. But the vast majority of students showed little enthusiasm for the contest. The wits and wiseacres of the 'varsity were polishing their epigrams for the week's debate in the union society where the subject for discussion was to be, "This house regrets that it ever came to Oxford!"

I and Enver made an appointment over the phone and went to meet Ethel Mannin, the woman writer, whose *Confessions and Impressions* had made a great impact not only on the two of us

but on our whole generation. She was married to Reginard Reynolds, the pacifist, who carried Gandhiji's letter to Lord Irwin and whose book, *The White Sahibs in India*, was banned for it was a fully documented indictment of British imperialism.

It was delightful to talk to Ethel Mannin, a British woman who did not take her ideas of India and her people from such films as *Ganga Din* and who had as little use for the British empire as the most ardent Indian nationalist. Surprisingly enough, I found her far more mature than I expected the author of *Confessions and Impressions* to be.

"Don't forget that I wrote that book more than ten years ago," she reminded me. In the decade that had intervened, a hedonist had turned a socialist and a pacifist, and written profounder books than her youthful *Confessions and Impressions* which carried Edna St. Milly's verses on the frontispiece.

My candle burns at both ends,
It will not last the night,
But ah, my friends, and ah, my foes,
It gives a lovely light.

London which I saw (as Ethel Mannin remarked in her Preface to my *Outside India*) "through the traditional—rather than factual—perpetual fog" of colour prejudice and racial discrimination, was warmed and illuminated by a living flame called Ethel Mannin.

21. My Long Love Affair—2

A few months before I left India, along the grapevine I came to know that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was shortly going abroad, and a daring stratagem occurred to me. How would it be if I could accompany the great Jawaharlal Nehru on his foreign tour as his secretary? I would not only meet politically important personages in England, France, Spain and Czechoslovakia, but would be in the thick of the international anti-fascist movement. He was likely to go to Spain where the bombs were already falling. The very idea was exciting and exhilarating. It would be the most appropriate training for a journalist and would-be author. But would he agree to take me with him?

Obsessed with this dream, on his next visit to Bombay, I trailed him from place to place in an effort to talk to him privately about my idea. At last the chance I got was in a theatre—the Capitol. Panditji had gone there at the invitation of the celebrated dancer Madame Menaka. I had my press pass, and I manoeuvred to get my seat just behind the group with Panditji. Colonel (later General) Sokhey, the eminent scientist and the husband of Madame Menaka, sat on Panditji's right and a young Parsi woman sat on his left. He had hardly taken his seat when the curtain rose and the performance began.

In the interval, as Colonel Sokhey went backstage, and Panditji's companion happened to walk out, I took the opportunity to greet Panditji and took the seat beside him.

"Panditji, I hear you are thinking of going abroad?"

"Yes—I think I must freshen up my tired and puzzled mind."

"I was also thinking of taking a foreign trip—my first!"

"That's good. That's very good."

I felt encouraged. So I asked. "Panditji, can I come along with you—at my own expense, of course—as your secretary?"

The bell rang for the interval to end, the lights were dimmed and his companions returned, so I took leave.

"See me tomorrow at Betty's place. We'll see what we can do," he said.

The next day I went to the Oomer Park residence of his sister, Mrs Betty Hutheesing, full of hope, and high expectations. But he was in a strange mood and the conversation between us took place something like this:

"Panditji, can I come along with you?"

"What will you do?"

"I will act as your secretary, buy tickets for you, and make appointments, take notes. . . ."

"But I can't afford to pay you. I have only limited foreign exchange.

"I am not asking for any payment. I will do it free—it will be a pleasure."

"But I am against exploiting people. Why should you work free for me?"

"You can then pay me a little. . . ."

"But I have no money. . . ."

And so on, round and round, we came to the same barren conclusion that he couldn't take me. Luckily for me Yusuf Meharally, whom I knew as one of the leaders of the Congress Socialist Party, came in, and Panditji said, "Yusuf, why don't you do something for this young man?"

Yusuf Meharally was, at that time, collecting young people to attend an anti-fascist world youth congress in New York. And he said, "Abbas, will you come with us to the World Youth Congress in August?"

"Yes, that'll be a good idea—You can then return via Europe and meet me there." That was Panditji's suggestion and for me it was as good as an order.

And so here I was, in a lift, the lift was in the League of Nations Headquarters, and the League of Nations was in Geneva, and Geneva was in Europe.

I joined my hands. "*Namaste*, Panditji."

"Hello, Abbas," He looked peevish and out of sorts.

"Have you also come to attend the League of Nations?"

"Of course not," he burst out, "Do you think I give any importance to this thieves' kitchen?" Then as the lift stopped

and he went out, dutifully followed by me, he said, "I have come only to see a friend here."

"When can I see you, Panditji?" I ventured to ask.

He took out his diary and pencilled something, as in later years he would scribble in many of his diaries, "Abbas—11 a.m."—or 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. or only "after 6 p.m.?" And put a question mark which meant "If there is time." But he always had time! Then he looked at me "Can you come at 6 p.m.?"

"Of course," I said, "but where?"

"Oh, I am sorry, write down the address of the friend where I am staying," and he gave me the address of Mr K. Zilliacus, then in the information section of the League of Nations secretariat.¹

I scribbled the address in my notebook, and said I would be there exactly at six.

I left my hotel punctually at 5-30 as I was told the address was not farther than a twenty-minute tram ride. But due to my lack of knowledge of French, the language used in Geneva, by the time I showed the address to the tram conductor, I missed my stop and had to walk back and show the address to several other persons. The result was that when I rang the bell at the house of Mr Zilliacus, the time was 6-40 p.m.

Mrs Zilliacus opened the door and welcomed me, and when she knew I had come to see Panditji, she said would I be seated in the drawingroom and she would inform him. But, she added a warning, "He has been impatiently waiting for you."

I knew Panditji's passion for punctuality and, fearing his temper, my heart sank in my shoes.

Soon he arrived, looking at his watch and I got up to greet him.

"I am sorry I am late, but I missed my stop on the tram," I explained.

"H'm," he said. "Sit down. Sit down. Now tell me about the Poughkeepsie conference."

I gave him a fairly detailed description of the youth congress,

¹Soon he would resign from the League of Nations and in 1945 would be Labour member of Parliament for Gateshead, and would, five years later, be expelled from the Labour Party for his unorthodox and forthright views.

and said the Indian issue was somewhat soft-pedalled to get the support of the Churchill-communists. "But," I proudly declared, "I spoke out that India and the colonial peoples will not be party to any war—or peace—unless our independence was guaranteed in advance."

"You did well," he commented and I was happy to hear him say that. "One should always make our position clear."

"But," I said, "the youth congress, I suppose, was held too late. Small wars have already started. The big war seems to be imminent."

"Yes," he said thinking aloud, "The war seems to be inevitable with the present mood of the fascist dictators."

I asked him of his impressions of Spain, and he surprised me by saying that, though the bombs were falling over Barcelona, he felt more at peace there than anywhere else—including India!

But he was bitter about France pursuing a policy of so-called non-intervention. It means, he said, that "the invaders of Spain are free to get arms and ammunition, not to mention fascist mercenaries, from Germany and Italy, through the sea, while the people of Spain are prevented from obtaining even food because the Pyrenees frontier is closed in the name of non-intervention, while women and children die through bombing or are starved from lack of food."

Just then the doorbell rang. It was the post man. Mrs Zillacus brought in several letters and a packet of newspapers and handed them to Panditji. She took her husband's mail in to him, and then she got busy laying the table for dinner.

Panditji briefly glanced at the letters, then opened the packet of newspapers. It was the first issue of the *National Herald* from Lucknow, for which I had sent an article from Paris about the war scare in Europe. Panditji was the chairman of the board of directors, so no wonder they had sent copies of the first issue to him by air mail. I was so anxious to see if my article was there that I looked over the shoulder of Panditji.

He noticed my eagerness. "Yes, your article is there—but how am I to read it? Should I stand on my head to know it is written by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas?"

Then he showed me the paper. And, true enough, the line "By Khwaja Ahmad Abbas" was printed upside down. It was

one of those mistakes which somehow crept into a paper at birth.

I said as much. But Panditji was furious. "Incompetent, that's what you all are! Can't even bring out a newspaper without some silly mistakes."

"Panditji, I am only the author of the article—not its printer who is someone in Lucknow!" I decided to take the bull by the horns. "Why are you getting angry at me?"

The frown was replaced by a smile on his face, then he chuckled. "Yes, you are right. Why am I shouting at you? I suppose because you are here, while the culprits are in Lucknow? Then he added with rare grace, "Actually, you should have shouted at me. After all I am the chairman of the board of directors and, therefore, I am responsible."

That was the wonderful thing about Jawaharlal Nehru—his quick flashes of temper were like storm clouds. When the outburst was over, the horizon would clear by a flashing smile. I remembered an incident which Radha, the cartoonist of the *Bombay Chronicle*, once related to me. The old man was an indifferent cartoonist, but he specialized in sketching celebrities, the head was big and the legs would be foreshortened. Mr Brelvi had instructed the news editor to publish one such sketch in a one-column block every day, for which Radha was paid three rupees!

One day, Radha had not been able to capture any celebrity, and thought of Panditji (who was staying at his sister's place) too late in the evening. He called at the Oomer Park flat and was admitted in. He was, as usual, shabbily dressed with a big portfolio containing his sketchbook and miscellaneous sketches carried under his arm.

Panditji was just finishing his dinner and had a meeting to address after that.

"Radha, what do you want at this hour of the night?" he asked, recognizing the visitor, from the diningroom alcove.

"I want to sketch, Panditji—it will just take fifteen minutes. . . ."

"It's impossible!" Panditji exploded, "In fifteen minutes I have to be at some meeting!"

Radha (who was also addicted to country liquor besides foul-smelling cheroots) started unabashedly weeping. When he got

up from the table, Panditji found the old man in tears.

"What are you crying for?" Panditji asked, irritably.

Radha told him, "You have had your dinner. But if I don't deliver your sketch by ten o'clock, I won't be able to earn *my* dinner."

"Is that so?" Panditji relented, then ordered his sister, "Krishna, I want Radha to have his dinner at your table. See to it he gets it immediately."

"I would rather like you gave me time for the sketch, Sir!" Radha feared that if he sat down at the table, Panditji would slip away.

"You will have both—the dinner and the sketch!"

And old Radha had both. After he had his dinner, Panditji sat down and said, "Now take as much time as you like. I am at your service."

I remembered that incident involving the cartoonist as I sat there in Geneva, listening to the clatter of plates in the dining-room area where Mrs Zilliacus was laying the table.

Then Panditji suddenly looked at his watch, a frown appeared on his smooth brow, and he declared, "It is seven already."

I looked puzzled at the relevance of this remark, as he had not indicated in advance how long I could stay.

He said, "You know these people have their dinner early."

I said, "Yes, I know that, Panditji."

Then he said bluntly, though in a stage whisper, "That's why I asked you to come at six."

I apologized again for my being late. "Not knowing French, and unable to afford a taxi, I couldn't help it."

"Do you think I'm going to ask these kind people to let my guest also eat here?"

"No, no, Panditji, you go ahead and eat. I will wait here for you to finish. I am not used to such an early dinner."

"That's impossible," said the sweet man bitterly, "how can I eat, while you sit here hungry . . .?"

I said in that case I will eat.

He said it was not done in Europe to surprise a hostess with uninvited guests.

I said that in that case I won't eat, and go away to save him the embarrassment, and see him again the next day.

"Tomorrow I am going to England," he said, "I guess I will have to"

Mrs Zilliacus saved us further fruitless discussion which, in any case, was going round in circles.

She came to the drawingroom and asked me, "Mr Abbas, may I invite you to dinner? In fact I have already laid out the table for the four of us."

I muttered something about it being late, and said I wouldn't be able to find my way back to the hotel in the dark.

Mr Zilliacus in comfortable slacks and slippers came out of his study, an intellectual-looking, grey haired, balding man, and said, "Nonsense, young man. I will take you in my car to your hotel. My name is Zilliacus:"¹

I shook hands with him, a warm and cordial handshake, and we all went in to dinner amidst laughter.

The dinner was an informal, hearty affair, and then we sat in the drawingroom, having our coffee as we watched the sun going down behind the hills. The lamps came to life and threw the whole place in soft shadows, as the four of us, two anti-fascist Indians and two anti-fascist Europeans, continued to talk far into the night about the state of the world and the threat of fascism. I had to repeat my experiences of the Poughkeepsie Youth Congress for the benefit of the Zilliacuses.

It was nearing nine when I took leave of my kind host, and his hosts, and then it was proposed that they would all go and leave me as, according to Mrs Zilliacus, "there are four seats in the car." I sat with Mrs Zilliacus in the front, while Panditji sat behind with Mrs Zilliacus.

At my modest hotel I thanked them, and bid them goodbye, and then the car was gone and soon it was hidden in the drizzle of the rain. But what was that? I felt moisture dripping from my eyes, and wondered whether it was the drizzle of the rain. But I knew it wasn't, and that they were tears of joy at the second greatest man of my country having just left me, a twenty-four year old cub reporter, at the door of a little Geneva hotel.

¹I had already read his *The Mirror of the Past*. In 1949 he would write (and I would read with much pleasure and profit) *I Choose Peace*, a stringent criticism of British foreign policy.

22. Drang Nach Osten

One of the phrases which Hitler made famous was *Drang Nach Osten*—the drive to the east. It was an ambitious geopolitical manoeuvre which almost came true during the next three years and, had Hitler's armies not been held, then mauled, then flung back by the Russians around Moscow, Leningrad and, finally, Stalingrad, even India would not have escaped the direct experience of war.

"The Drive to the East" was a concept of Hitler according to which his armies would drive across central Europe, then eastern Europe, then Turkey, then the oil fields of the Middle East, finally meeting the Japanese on the plains of India. Why should I not anticipate Hitler and have an overland *Drang Nach Osten* of my own, while there was still time. Or was there?

I got my steamer ticket exchanged for a rail ticket up to Basrah from where I could take the steamer to Karachi or Bombay. Friends warned me against crossing so many frontiers—a mishap or crisis in any little country would hold me up for several months, or several years, or I might forfeit my life. This last warning was what decided the issue. Now I was determined to "drive to the east"—ahead of Hitler. Adventure has always called me—but, alas, at the last moment eluded me.

"Heil Hitler!"

Appropriately enough, these were the first words that I heard on German soil.

The gruff, guttural voice jerked me out of my sleep, as I lay doubled up on a hard seat in a third class compartment on the Paris-Munich Express.

"Heil Hitler!"

As I opened my eyes I saw a typical Prussian uniformed officer, saluting me with his arm held high. He had evidently been repeating the gesture for some time and his manner was

clearly resentful of my un-German laziness. I had to say something to respond to the Nazi greetings. Why not the Indian equivalent? I folded my hands and said, "*Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai.*"

"Passport," he said.

I produced the document—this was scrutinized with care.

"Baggage."

Having shipped my two suitcases from London, I produced my typewriter, a camera, a blanket, and an attache case containing three shirts and the proverbial tooth brush.

He looked about for more baggage under the seat, and when he didn't find it, he shrugged his shoulders and stamped my passport.

It was about midnight when we crossed into Hitler's Germany. The train had stopped at the small frontier station for passport and customs examination, but as the train was virtually empty—a sign of the times—we were soon on our way.

The correct word was Munchen for the town known as Munich in the English-speaking world. We steamed into Munchen station early in the morning. There were flags and swastikas everywhere—and uniformed figures moved about in the ghostly semi-darkness.

When I went to the restaurant for breakfast, I was greeted by a waiter with a "Heil Hitler."

I informed him in my atrocious German "*Ich weiss nicht Deutsch*" (I don't know German). This was one of the few phrases I had learnt from the guide book. By the time I reached India I would be able to express my ignorance in six or seven languages. "Heil Hitler! Fried eggs or poached eggs?" the waiter asked in passable English.

Having fortified myself with breakfast, I sallied forth to have a glimpse of this city which had been so much in the news, being the place where Chamberlain betrayed Czechoslovakia.

Groups of Brown Shirts were collected in front of the railway station where an exhibition of model aeroplanes was being held to impress upon them the might of the Luftwaffe, the Nazi air force. Everyone seemed to be "Heil Hitlering" the others.

I went in a charabanc with a party of tourists to look at the Fuehrerhaus at Berchtesgarden, a pretty enough place nestling

in the bosom of the hills, where Hitler spent much of his time, and where he and Chamberlain sat down together to dismember Czechoslovakia.

Back in the city, I happened to be walking by a building which was obviously a student's hostel. I went in just out of curiosity and found there a number of Indian students. Before this, in Paris, I had met some old Indian revolutionaries who were pronouncedly pro-Nazi. But this was the first time I met youthful pro-Nazi Indians. They submitted me to a ridiculous cross-examination: "Have you got documents to prove you are really a journalist?", "Why does the *Bombay Chronicle* write against the Nazis?", "Who is paying your expenses?" and "When are you leaving Munich?" I was glad to inform them that I was taking the first train out.

Among the Indian boys I had met at the hostel there was a young Indian artist who told me that he was holding an exhibition of his paintings in Gallerystrasse. I visited the place, and was glad to see that someone had been enterprising enough to come here all the way from India to show the Germans that we are not after all such utter barbarians as their Fuehrer made us out to be in his *Mein Kampf*.

Towards the evening, as there was still time for the train which would leave near midnight, I again joined a charabanc party for a tour of the countryside. Leaving the city behind, we were soon racing at sixty miles an hour over a super highway which was undoubtedly the best motor road I had seen anywhere in the world. It was scientifically planned to allow maximum traffic at the highest speed. The Bavarian landscape provided a magnificent backdrop at sunset. At an enchanting little inn on the shore of a lake, we had an excellent tea, and after a few minutes halt we were on our way again. Coming back to the main highway, we raced along a mechanized column of the army, high-powered trucks, tanks, bulletproof staff cars for officers, and motorcycles ridden by steel-helmeted soldiers. The military significance of these *autobahns*, the German name for this road system, was suddenly revealed to me. The purpose of spending millions on them was not to provide facilities to tourists to look at picturesque scenery but to transport vast sections of mechanized army across the continent in the shortest possible time. Like an arrow the road was aimed,

as a part of the strategy of *Drang Nach Osten*, at the Middle East—and India!

Travelling by night again, I reached Vienna in the morning. I believe we crossed what was a few months ago the Austrian frontier but the train did not stop for passport examination. That is *Anschluss*!

I had never been in a city held by an army of occupation. But it cannot be very different from the Vienna that I saw. From the moment that you stepped down from the train you were aware of the presence of foreign troops. Bullet-headed Prussian officers, swaggering young Nazi storm troopers, goose-stepping squadrons of German soldiers, marched triumphantly along the streets of Vienna. Conquerors!

I joined an American Express excursion party to go round the city. Starting from the ornate Opera House, along Ringstrasse and Kaertnerstrasse we "did" the fashionable part of the city, then went through a labyrinth of narrower roads and side streets, crowded and often shabby, and finally arrived at the old Hapsburg palaces. Having plenty of magnificent ruins in our own country I was not much impressed by these decaying monuments of an obsolete empire. But I liked the fine big public buildings—theatres, museums, libraries and colleges—which have all been built on a generous scale worthy of a noble city. Above all, I admired the wonderful blocks of flats that were built for the workers by the Socialist municipal administration of Vienna in the pre-Schuschnigg years.

The excursion over, I decided to explore the city on my own. The first thing that I noticed was the beauty of the trees that lined either side of the big boulevards. Autumn had turned the leaves the colour of copper and already they had begun to fall in golden heaps all over the pavements. Under the afternoon sun the shadows of the trees cut beautiful patterns on the ground, fluid and variable like reflections in water. All important public buildings in Vienna seemed to have parks surrounding them with fine old trees harmonizing with the age-worn piles of stone and flowerbeds, lending colour to an otherwise grey background. We would miss a great deal of beauty and grace in our lives if our cities of the future were to be devoid of trees and parks and lawns and become mere jungles

of steel and cement, like New York!

Having had a sore experience of a taxi, and with plenty of time on my hands, I took a carriage, rather a rickety affair driven by a hungry-looking horse, very much like a Bombay Victoria. With the help of the dictionary I explained to the driver that I wanted to drive to the Woods. The celebrated Vienna Woods. At least they are as beautiful as depicted in *The Great Waltz*, or perhaps more, for no movie camera can adequately reproduce the play of light and shade and the serene beauty of this place.

But Vienna is not all woods. And when I returned to resume my wanderings in the city I was witness to far less pleasant phenomena. I was standing in front of the statue of Goethe, adjusting my camera to take a photograph, when I saw a dark-haired old woman looking furtively about and then guiltily sitting down on one of the many benches on the pavement. Hardly a minute had passed, than I saw a Nazi police official, with a swastika on his armlet, roughly removing her from the bench. The woman, who was in threadbare clothes and was obviously weary with walking, did not utter a single word of protest and trudged away.

I was later that I got to know the significance of this incident. The benches laying by the roadside for the convenience of pedestrians bore a notice painted in big white letters to the effect that they can be used only by Aryans. Not by Jews—not even by weary old Jewish woman!

A couple of students who knew English and whom I happened to meet in a cafe told me in hushed whispers of the awful fate of their city since the *Anschluss*. "Ours was the city," one of them said, "that gave asylum to revolutionary intellectuals from all over the world and yet today we must ourselves seek refuge in some alien land." I asked them about the prospects of the Nazification of Austria to the extent of the country losing its individuality completely and the young man with keen fiery eyes replied, "Austria was never Germany and shall never be."

The Blue Danube at Budapest is not blue at all. From the Ferenc-Jozef bridge I saw it as a dirty, grey, sluggish stream full of steamers and boats. At night, however, when the lights of

Budapest are reflected in its dark depths and even ugly freighters assume the aspect of fairyland argosies, the famous river does become an incentive to romance and an inspiration to composers of rhapsodies.

Having slept in a soft bed in the best hotel in town, after several sleepless nights in train, I came out to investigate Budapest on my own, armed with a map. The first thing that struck me was the shabbiness of most of the people in the streets. The contrast between the fine clothes of the local gentry I had seen at breakfast in the hotel and the dirty rags of the peasants in the nearby vegetable market was too glaring to be missed. Hungary was a country (like India of 1938) of landlords and landless peasants, of feudal luxury and appalling poverty.

The next thing I noticed was the name of a street—Musso-
lini Utca! Fascist (as well as Nazi) papers were on sale on many news-stands. For many years Hungary (which with its anti-Socialist White Terror of 1919-21 gave Europe the first taste of fascist atrocities) was under the influence of Italy. Even today fascist agents are busy in the country and have bought the support of some parties. But of late the country had been the object of special attention of the Nazi propagandists whose influence had vastly increased with the disappearance of Austria.

Another factor had helped to consolidate the German position in Hungary. The day I arrived in Budapest, the whole country was celebrating the return of territory which, by the Versailles treaty, had been incorporated in Czechoslovakia. The jingoes and super-patriots have always played upon the Hungarians' sense of indignation caused by the loss of practically half their empire. Patriotism was once again being inflamed to white heat to celebrate the return of at least a part of the lost empire. As I watched the big military parade held at the war memorial I could understand how they must feel grateful to Hitler for having caused the return of this territory by the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. I could also not help noticing that the military equipment of the army on parade was almost exclusively of German manufacture. In return for Hungarian grain Hitler had been arming a likely ally! There were a number of Nazi and near-Nazi groups in Hungary, mostly financed with German funds, and Regent Horthy himself was no friend of democracy.

I also saw the other side of Budapest. With Kabos, the great Hungarian film star to whom I had brought a letter of introduction from his son in London, I drove round the city which, in many respects, is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. We saw the fine Parliament House on the river, far more impressive than Westminster in London, drove out of the city through avenues of magnificent old trees and visited some film studios which did not strike me as being very much better than those we have in India. In the evening I roamed about the famous "Zoo in Budapest" with its vast grounds and amazing collection of animals from all over the world. It certainly is the romantic place that it is reputed to be.

Back at the hotel, I dined in a huge gilded diningroom with old fashioned mirrors on the walls. It reminded me of a "set" in some old movie. Among those present were Hungarian nobles, English commercial travellers, American tourists and quite a few uniformed army officers. As I differently entered the place, terribly conscious of my far from presentable clothes, I was embarrassed by the courtly bow of the head waiter who conducted me to a small table for two very near the orchestra. I was soon joined by a young Hungarian lady whom I had met on the train and who had agreed to keep me company at dinner. That saved me from the necessity of telling every waiter, *Nef Beszel Magyarul* (I don't know Hungarian). The orchestra struck a lively tune and we started eating.

After the overture I noticed the orchestra conductor bowing to me in a rather peculiar manner. Soon he came up to me and asked "*Beszel Angolul?*" (Do you speak English?) He then told me that he had been in India where he played at the leading hotels of Calcutta and Bombay. I muttered something about the world being a small place, after all.

Rumania turned out to be like the Punjab—miles upon miles of rolling wheat-yielding plains.

Poor, shabbily clad peasants were seen patiently walking behind old fashioned horse-driven ploughs. You saw them at the railway stations in quaint dresses which would be picturesque if they were not so dirty. Children, shivering in the cold Balkan air, sold you apples that were sour but nevertheless cheap. The poverty-stricken, easygoing, rural atmosphere was more of the

agricultural countries of Asia than of industrialized Europe.

This was Rumania, the country that threatened to become the cockpit of Europe in the event of another Great War. It might suffer the fate of Belgium in 1914. Indeed, for an army of aggression Rumania was not only a means to an end, a passage like Belgium, but an end in itself.

I was travelling ahead of Hitler. This was the route he was likely to follow to fulfil the Berlin-Baghdad dream.

Those corn fields one saw from the train would be one of the causes of Rumania being involved in a war. But a bigger *causus belli* would be those huge oil wells which lie almost hidden by the surrounding crop of wheat. From the train one could just see in the distance their mast-like derricks rising towards the sky. There is far too much oil in Rumania. This surfeit of oil might possibly cause an international conflagration. Hitler needed for his country the Rumanian wheat and Rumanian oil as well as the abundant crops of the Ukraine that lay beyond. And, unless he was checked by a concert of the democracies, the Nazi Fuehrer seemed determined to follow his conquest of Czechoslovakia and the consequent domination over Hungary with the annexation—open or, may be, slightly veiled and indirect—of Rumania.

Rumania, more than any other eastern European country created or enlarged on the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian empire, presented, ethnological features which were puzzling in their complex variety. I was surprised to hear Arabic words like *Hammaal* (porter) and *Baksheesh* (tip) in Bucharest and Constanta, but they recalled the days when the Ottoman Turks were masters of Eastern Europe.

The Iron Guard was outlawed as a political party but it still functioned and an acquaintance pointed out some of its leaders grouped together in the lobby of the leading hotel in Bucharest. The Rumanian government, in fact, was itself responsible for the growing menace of the Iron Guard. For several years the organization was tolerated until the police discovered a plot for the violent overthrow of the government last year and the Guard had to be declared illegal. There were rumours of King Carol's impending visit to Britain, to negotiate an alliance with the "democracies"; counter rumours that he was to visit not London but Berlin and that in the event of a war Rumania

would throw in her weight with the totalitarian states.

And, across the dark waters of the Black Sea lay Turkey. From there, a few hours I left Bucharest, came news that startled and upset every Balkan country, and left the political busybodies in Bucharest agitatedly guessing the likely repercussions on the balance of power in eastern Europe. I hastened to catch the boat from Constanta to Istanbul.

In Istanbul a schoolgirl said to me, "I am sorry you have come to my country at a time when I am mourning the death of my father." *My father! Our father!* Ataturk—Father of the Turks—that was what the man who was no more was called. Out of the debris of a crumbling, degenerate empire he built the edifice of a modern state. He substituted knowledge for ignorance, reason for superstition, industrial self-sufficiency for economic servility. Everything that is modern and progressive in Turkey bears the unmistakable impress of Kemal Ataturk.

Istanbul—nee Constantinople—is an old city, in form and colour definitely of the East. Limitless age is stamped upon this city which, in respect of influence over the course of human affairs, has perhaps only three rivals in the western world—Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. Situated where Europe and Asia are joined, it has truly been at the crossroads of history. In the strange conglomeration of its churches and mosques, palaces and ruins, are to be found the relics of two of the greatest empires in world history. The changes in its name are significant testimony to the epic transformation it has seen—Byzantium, Constantinople, Istanbul!

The Arabic script seems to have been completely abolished in Turkey. Everything is written phonetically in the Latin script, thus following neither English nor French mode of spelling. Thus it is "Jorj" insted of "George" and "Amerikan Ekspres Ko, Ink" instead of "American Express Co. Inc." To one from India, it comes as a surprise to see that even notices in mosques, announcing prayer timings, and inscriptions on tombstones are written in the Latin script.

In the grand empty hall of St. Sophia I saw placed in a corner a big round board with the word "Allah" inscribed on it in the Arabic script. Originally it was fixed in a conspicuous place on the wall. "Allah in a Corner" may strike some as an

apposite description of this allegedly Godless country. But there are no restrictions on Islam—or, for that matter, on any religion—in Turkey. Secularization of the state is often confused with irreligiousness. I found thousands of people offering prayers in the mosques of Istanbul without any hindrance. The prayers (as distinguished from the *khutba* or sermon) are recited in Arabic as usual.

From the days of the Khilafat agitation when Indian nationalists made the cause of Turkey their own, a close link has existed between the two countries. I still remember how as a child I used to be intrigued by curious foreign names like Constantinople, Gallipoli, Enver Pasha, Kemal Pasha, etc., being frequently used in public meetings and newspapers at that time.

The memory of those days was revived by a strange encounter I had in Istanbul when, together with a group of Chinese Muslim youths who were touring the Islamic countries—to rouse sympathy for China, I happened to visit St. Sophia.

In front of the monument we were met by a group of interpreter-guides who, noticing that we were foreigners, offered their services in various languages. Among them, they seemed to be able to speak every language under the sun—English, French, German, Persian, Arabic, Russian. Just by way of mystifying them with a language that, I was sure, none of them understood, I said, “*Kaho, bhai, koi Hindustani bhi janta hai?*” (Say, brother, does anyone of you know Hindustani?)

Imagine my surprise when a shrivelled little man of over fifty disentangled himself from the crowd and, greeting me in fluent Hindustani, embraced me like a long-lost brother.

Within a few minutes, he was entertaining us in a nearby cafe. It was then that he told me how he happened to be in Istanbul. His accent bore the peculiar impress of Bhendi Bazar and, on being questioned, he said that he had lived for many years in Abdul Rehman Street in Bombay. It was during the Balkan War that Mahmud (that was his name) took it into his head to leave India and join the Turkish army. Travelling was not easy at that time and it was after many adventures that Mahmud reached Turkey by the overland route, through Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. He not only fought in the Balkan War but also in the Great War and recalled with pride serving

under the late Kemal. His life ambition—to be the citizen of a free country—had been fulfilled. Legally, he was a Turk. And yet, as he talked to me excitedly about Indian politics, the development of our struggle for freedom and the changing social conditions, I knew that in the heart of this man there was still a place that would be for ever India.

There is little of the mediaeval atmosphere of Istanbul in the new capital of Turkey. An overnight's journey, across a rugged countryside, Ankara is reached in the morning. The railway station provides the first pleasant shock—all marble and chromium—one of the most modern railway stations. There is a sense of wonder and expectancy as one drives towards the city over a fine road flanked by rows of young trees, by themselves a miracle in this Anatolian wasteland.

The new Ankara, linked with the old town at one end, extends far into the countryside, so that there is no cramping for space. Broad avenues with young trees defying the rigours of the treacherous climate lead one from the business and residential quarter to the government secretariat and parliament building on the one side and the race course and the railway station on the other. The buildings, of reinforced concrete with a lavish use of glass, tiles, woods and marble, mostly follow the cubistic forms of neo-German architecture with only an occasional intrusion of the Saracenic arches or the Turkish dome. Besides the main block of government buildings which was then still receiving the finishing touches, notable buildings included the "Halk Evi" (People's House for Culture and Recreation), the archaeological museum, the music college and the industrial exhibition building.

Life in Ankara was as modern as were the buildings. There were luxurious hotels, restaurants, theatres, cinemas and music halls, night clubs and well-equipped shops. Young Turks—men and women—moved about with a newly-acquired dignity and freedom, proud of their city and their country and, above all, proud of the saviour and maker of their nation, Kemal Ataturk, who was no more amidst them, but whose personality still inspired them. His equestrian statue dominated the town, from its high pedestal, transfixed in a defiant gesture—challenging the clouds!

Interesting are the experiences one has on the Taurus Express, which is such a mighty link in the overland route from Europe to Asia. The train starts from Hyderpasha, Istanbul's railway terminus on the Asiatic mainland, where it connects with the Simplon-Orient Express from Paris which stops on the other side of the narrow strip of sea. Among its passengers are representatives of practically every major nation in the world. As varied and interesting crowd as one may expect on an ocean liner.

It seems proper to set down what may be called: the Strange Episode of the Turkish Girl who said to me "I Love You."

I boarded the Express at Ankara. In the same compartment were a Turkish boy and girl, evidently brother and sister, who were good enough to give me a seat. The train having started, some conversation was indicated. Knowing that most of the educated Turks know French I let go one of the very few French phrases I had picked up in Paris "*Parlez vous Anglais?*" (Do you speak English?), to which the girl replied in the negative but misunderstood it to mean that I knew French. Then the strange thing happened.

She launched into fluent French which, of course, I did not understand at all, until she uttered three words in English which, at least for a few moments, naturally flattered my ego. She said, "I love you."

Now for the anti-climax which, too, I faithfully record even though it made me feel like a fool. A Turk who knew a little English entered our compartment, the girl repeated the whole story to him in Turkish and he explained that some English tourist had once told her "I love you" and she wanted to know what it meant. We all had a hearty laugh.

We left Ankara in the evening. Next morning, as we tore across the face of Turkey, had some idea of the immensity of this country. It was, however, for the most part barren land with little trace of cultivation. Irrigation, however, was making a headway and fruit orchards were to be seen at frequent intervals. We had apples for breakfast and oranges for lunch, bought from peasant children at small wayside stations.

One felt cramped sitting for a long time in the compartment. While walking in the corridor, I met an interesting young man who carried a violin case in his hand. He was getting down at

the next station and I had a few words with him in English cum French cum pantomime. I learnt that he was a music student and in the holidays he, like many others, was going on a tour of small towns in the interior to play at inns and cafes to create a taste for music among the people.

We crossed the Syrian frontier at about 5 p.m. It was marked only by a little pyramid jutting out of the earth. Elsewhere in the world far more clearly defined frontiers are being violated. Turkey, however, had no imperialist designs even though Syria was once under her domination. In spite of the great military strength he built up, Kemal never dreamt of reviving Ottoman imperialism. Even the staunchest Turkish patriots I talked to, not once mentioned the possibility of their country demanding the return of the territory that once comprised the Turkish empire. They had rationally realized, as Hitler and Mussolini had not, that genuine nationalism must respect the nationalism of the neighbour!

I could not subsist for long on a fruit diet. In the evening I repaired to the dining car for a regular meal. I shared the table with a remarkable man—a representative of international finance and capital! He owned a firm that printed currency notes for Turkey and the Balkan countries and also lent money to some of the small monarchies of Eastern Europe. He seemed to be on familiar terms with all the rulers of these states and told me some amusing but unprintable anecdotes about some of them. (Alas, he should be unemployed now!)

He proved to be an Englishman who had begun his career as an army officer in India. Learning that I was an Indian he tried some *sub achha hai?* stuff on me which first annoyed and then amused me.

Next morning we reached Tel Kotchak where, for the time being, the railway line ended.

At Tel Kotchak I met a party of eight Americans (who at once became friendly and informal) and half a dozen Englishmen (who maintained their characteristic reserve) who all got down from the same train. I found that they were employees of some oil companies and were on their way to Bahrein.

A fleet of cars and a truck for our luggage awaited the fifteen of us who had through tickets to Baghdad. For a few miles we drove along the railway track that was under construction, then

we tumbled across the sandy barren plain guided by the track beaten by the passage of earlier cars. Having crossed the Syrian-Iraqi frontier at noon, we reached Mosul at five o'clock in the evening. Here we stopped for the night. Travelling by night was still dangerous in those days.

A strange character appeared in the lounge of the rest house while we were sipping black Arab coffee after dinner. He was a tall swarthy Arab sheikh, a small chieftain, who spoke perfect English and carried on conversation in whispers with some British oilmen who were also staying there. The word went round that, though out of politics, he was a "big shot" in Iraq and that he was in touch with most foreign commercial interests operating in the country. From what I heard he enjoyed a reputation that was a cross between an intriguing diplomat and a gang leader. Reading in the *Iraq Times* that night about a new oil concession having been granted by the Iraqi parliament (despite opposition), I wondered if the mysterious Sheikh had something to do with it.

Next morning, after breakfast, we left Mosul in a "desert bus"—a huge vehicle with comfortable seats and practically airconditioned. For hundreds of miles we travelled across an arid, waterless desert. Here and there we passed a small village built round a water hole. The biggest of these is Arbil which, someone said is even mentioned in the Bible. This desert country, it is strange to reflect, was the home of one of the world's oldest civilizations—the Assyrian! It was heart-breaking to witness the terrible poverty of the people in this region though the sight of a school was an encouraging sign of progress. One of the Americans, sitting next to me, amazed me with the sympathetic attitude he took in talking about Iraq and Iraqis. "Sure, these guys are as good as me or you. Give them a little education, start an irrigation scheme and this desert will become another California where I come from." That would require a revolution, I thought.

In the late afternoon we passed some oil wells—owned by the British, of course—and then drove along the precious pipeline which was one of the most vital veins of the Empire.

Behind us the derricks of the oil wells were silhouetted against a flaming sunset sky as we reached Kirkuk and found the train waiting for us, Dinner at the railway rest house—and

we were on the last lap of our journey to Baghdad!

Baghdad was not the famed city of the Arabian Nights. It was *then* (it is not *now*, it is completely transformed, judging from a documentary that I saw at the end of 1974), a dusty town, not too clean, the old river Tigris that flowed in the middle of the city being its only redeeming feature. Westernization, however, seemed to be already making considerable headway in Iraq. Almost the first sign I saw on the streets was *Makhzan-ul-Hollywood* (Hollywood Store). (Reminded me of the joke I read somewhere: an American tourist on a camel somewhere in the Arab desert saying, "At last we are away from civilization," then asking the camel driver "what is the name of your dromedary?" and getting the answer, "Greta Garbo!") It was also surprising to see powdered and rouged young women walking about freely, their black *chadars* serving only ornamental purpose. The picturesque camel—or horse-driven charabance which was the vehicle which, twenty years ago, was used by my father, uncle and aunt to go to Kerbala, and other holy places—has given place to regular trains, buses and rickety taxis.

I took one such taxi and went to Kerbala. The road is passable but on either side of it is the great waterless desert. It was here that the immortal martyr of Islam, Imam Husain, with his seventy-two followers and women of his family, faced the merciless hordes of the tyrant Yezid, was starved even of water for three days, and preferring death to servility, left behind a shining example to all fighters against injustice. Yet today no one even knows where Yezid is buried, while Muslims from all over the world annually commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husain and hundreds of thousands of pilgrims may be seen every day at the magnificent tomb in the little town of Kerbala.

The face of Baghdad, and of the whole of Iraq, has changed for the better ever since the Iraqi revolution and the nationalization of the Iraqi oil wells eight years ago. I owe Iraq another visit.

The same night I took the train to Basrah because the weekly steamer to India was leaving the next day. I had reached the end of my resources. I had just enough money to buy a

deck class ticket (Rs 17) to Karachi, and from there travel third class to Panipat.

Aboard the S.S. *Varsova* I found my American friends. They were travelling to Bahrein in the first class but to those sturdy democrats it was not *infra dig* to come down and sit sprawling on deck, and they scandalized their fellow first class passengers by inviting me to dine with them in first class!

The courtesy of the Indian passengers in my own class was no less remarkable. Seeing that I had no bedding to spread on the floor except a blanket, they all came out with offers of mattresses, pillows and sheets, so that I was provided with quite a comfortable bed. Long and interesting were the talks we used to have at night, exchanging our impressions and experiences and discussing our national problems, from untouchability to unemployment. It was a mixed crowd—pilgrims returning from Kerbala, employees of the Anglo-Persian Oil Co. from Abadan, an army tailor returning from Palestine, and a lighthouse keeper going home on leave!

But for the consideration they showed me, the six days on this steamer would have been unbearable. In the same covered and enclosed space (about sixty feet by forty-five feet) were herded (1) nearly fifty passengers, (2) two horses, (3) three sheep, and (4) about twenty chicken. The tables where we had our meals were at a distance of less than thirty feet from the stinking stalls of the horses, with no partition between them, and some unfortunate people were forced to sleep hardly three feet away from the horses.

But I should not complain. After all, similar conditions then prevailed for the vast mass of our countrymen, condemned to live for ever amidst poverty, filth and disease. Indians who go abroad and return after seeing London and Paris and New York are often liable to forget the realities of life in their own country. On the third class deck of S.S. *Varsova* I was in India even before we reached Karachi.

23. Film Critic Extraordinary

Back at the *Bombay Chronicle*, I was confirmed as a film critic, and for three years I saw some three hundred Indian and foreign films a year.

My editor gave me complete liberty to be as critical as I wanted to be, but he advised me that when I wanted to be very critical I should use as abstruse words as possible. For instance, he said, when you want to say a film is lousy, say it is inconsequential; when you want to say that a script is rotten, say it is putrid. "The producers don't know much English—so they won't be offended, while the intelligent readers will get your message."

Beyond that, he left me free to conduct the three pages per week according to my ideas—three pages per week (a page about Indian films on Wednesday, another full page of foreign film reviews on Friday, and two pages of the Sunday edition, which were equal to one page of full-size, for gossip and photographs of the whole film world—Indian and foreign) seems rather an exaggerated dream of a film critic in these days of paper shortages.

But in those days, newsprint was ridiculously cheap—we used it as napkins, as hand towels, as table covers which we wanted to eat anything, and everyone was allowed, every month, to take home a dozen scribbling blocks for our personal use. Whenever they were exhausted we could take more. Newsprint, I think, at that time was less than half a rupee per pound. My book of travel impressions, *Outside India*, covering two hundred and sixty pages, with a hard cover and a two-colour dust cover, was priced at two and a half rupees, while today ordinary film magazines cost three rupees per copy!

Mr Brelvi was woefully misinformed about the educational level of film producers. Evidently quite a few of them—or, at least, someone in their entourage of hangers-on currently called

chamchas—were able to understand that here was a critic who was lambasting most of their pictures. They made written complaints, then some of them came over and charged me with being prejudiced against Indian films generally. They hinted at withdrawal of all film advertising from the *Chronicle*.

My editor sent me their written complaints, and later called me over for a personal chat. Before the matter went over to the proprietor, he advised me to ignore the pictures that were very bad, and to dismiss the others in a paragraph or two. "But if you really come across an unusual, interesting and distinguished picture, go all out to praise it—so the very length of the review will make it obvious to the readers that this is the one picture that you recommend."

Soon I had an opportunity to test the freedom given by my editor.

I was not then a great fan of Shantaram. I had seen some of his mythological or mytho-historical opuses, and (beyond recognizing his technical mastery) I was not impressed. The only picture which had created an impression on me was *Duniya Na Mane* (or *Unexpected*) starring Shanta Apte, in which, according to me, symbolism was carried a little too far, and when the donkeys brayed and pursued the *mama*, I thought it was too much!

A new picture of Shantaram called *Admi* was being advertised for several months—and yet had not arrived. It made "Studio Spy," one of my alter-egos, write in "The Fifth Column," (which was an innocuous gossip column, literally placed in the middle of the page) that "It appears that Shantaram's *Admi* is coming on foot from Poona to Bombay and, having trudged the weary miles, is now taking rest somewhere under the shade of a tree!"

The result was that when the picture came at last, no invitation came to the film critic of the *Bombay Chronicle*. But I had heard it was an extraordinary film, and bought a ticket to see it. Next day I saw it again. (In all, I saw it eighteen times!) Then I sat down and wrote a seven-column review of it. Normally the page was called "Mainly About Motion Pictures" but that week it was "Mainly About a Motion Picture Called *Admi*." I regarded it as a textbook on cinematic realism, compared it with the works of great masters like Eisenstein and

Pudovkin, John Ford and Erich von Stroheim. I compared the work of Shantaram with his three Indian contemporaries—the Bengali trio of Devaki Bose, Nitin Bose and Barua—and said that Shantaram's faith in life was above, and far beyond, the lyricism of Devaki Bose, the romanticism of Nitin Bose but, more pointedly, the pessimism of Barua. I think that it was the longest review of any single motion picture published in a daily or weekly anywhere in the world.

The review did make people sit up, rub their eyes in wonder whether all that could be real, could be true. But they went to see the picture which had made a critic apparently mad. Envious producers asked Shantaram how much he had paid for it "under the table," and he had to confess that he had not even seen the face of the film critic who had written it, didn't know him from Adam. He wrote me a letter of thanks, suggesting that we should meet and discuss the picture further.

I agreed to meet him in the Central Cinema where *Admi* was then running to bumper houses (The era of twenty theatre releases had yet to arrive). That meeting, and the seeing of the picture together (I had already seen it four or five times), led to a friendship between Shantaram and me, with Baburao Patel's ebullient personality and super-ego providing a link between the self-taught middle-aged Maharashtrian director and the young man fresh from a brief visit to Hollywood who vainly thought that he had got the whole world film industry by the tail.¹

I had met Baburao Patel only recently when he had called me to contribute articles to *filmindia*. I had a sneaking admiration for Baburao Patel and his magazine—they were everything that I wasn't. They were glossy, opulent, popular, they hit hard when necessary and (not infrequently) when not necessary, and thus came to be a model of the "sledge-hammer" style of film journalism which then, as now, ensured a vast readership. I, therefore, welcomed this opportunity to have a popular *medium* for my *message*. When it came to discussing the terms, I remember the conversation went something like this:

¹It was not to be always so. In 1970, while inaugurating a festival of Shantaram's old classics when he was present, I said these films laid the foundations of realism in Indian films, and added that it was important that we including Mr Shantaram should all see them!

"What terms for contributing articles for *filmindia*?"

"Complete freedom of expression. No editorial blue-pencilling."

"You will have complete freedom of expression. But what will you charge for writing each article?"

"How much can you pay me?"

"Fifty rupees per article."

"Then I will charge forty rupees."

"Why forty? Why not fifty?"

"I will leave ten rupees for my conscience money. I don't want to feel that I am under any obligation to you."

Starting with my first article, together we carried on a campaign against anti-Indian films in general, and *Ganga Din* in particular. By and by we collected a number of writers—specially film writers—around us. There was Bakoolesh (alas, now dead!) who was a film publicist who wrote film advertisements for a living, and was an avid reader of American and European fiction, from whom I heard (for the first time) the name of the Icelandic author Bjornstein-bjornstein; Jamil Ansari, delicate of health and build, but a robust intellectual (now somewhere in Pakistan); Jithubhai, a Gujarati journalist who specialized in film criticism (who is still happily alive); Saadat Hasan Manto, the quickest literary writer who wrote remarkable short stories and humorous articles, as well as film reviews, straight on his Urdu typewriter (who would be jailed for writing a short story, then sent to an asylum for alcoholism, and finally died—all in Pakistan).

We formed the first Film Journalists Association with Baburao Patel as the (inevitable) president. We were a different breed of film critics and journalists who were more concerned with discussing the directorial styles of Frank Capra and Shantaram, Lubitsch and Winaŷak, than with the vital statistics and amorous adventures of a Parveen Bobi and a Rekha, which seems to be the only topic that seems to interest contemporary critics—and their readers.

We were invited to Prabhat Studio in Poona, and were taken round the very well equipped and organized sound stages, and there is a memorable photograph of all of us—including Shantaram—in the dress room, each one of us crowned with headgear of his choice.

It was about that time that I received a long letter from one of my readers—accusing me at length of being partial in favour of Shantaram and being prejudiced against Barua (his *Zindagi* had just been released and reviewed by me) and the Bengali directors. It was signed “V.P. Sathe,” by which, I gathered, that the writer was not a Bengali but a Maharashtrian. There was obvious sincerity in the article, and also the man (whoever he was) obviously knew the film game, he knew what he was talking about. So I sent back the long article to him, with a personal letter, suggesting that if he cut it to half the size—I left what to delete to him—I would gladly publish it with my reply which would be of the same length as the charge sheet. Three days later, I received the shortened article, and wrote a reply, exactly equal in length, which I published—side by side, leaving the readers to choose between the two points of view.

Only after the article was published did I venture to suggest that we might meet over a cup of tea. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship between Sathe and me which, for thirty-five years, has survived our occasional differences not only about films but about politics and literature. Sathe is a bookworm, a real intellectual who keeps his integrity and his cool in the midst of filmic storms. From an apprentice in the Metro organization, he joined the film publicity firm of B.P. Samant and Company.

Now he has a flourishing film publicity firm of his own with three partners, but he is the senior—or the most important—partner among them. He is never ruffled and has a placid temperament, despite working in the inflammable atmosphere of “films.” He has a car, owns a flat in a cooperative society, has a wonderful wife with two very bright children—one a boy who is an Air India junior executive, and the other a girl who is a final year student of architecture. He writes a syndicated film column every week, attends all the *mahurats* and all the premieres, is respected by all in the film industry, but he keeps his opinion of the film industry and its films to himself and won’t let it interfere with his film publicity work. Though he publicizes most of the successful producers’ films, to which the large collection of silver jubilee trophies in his home testifies, he talks more about the latest book of Jean Paul Sartre or Steinbeck, or the last book of Ernest Hemingway, or likes to have a discussion about Bresson (whose films he admires and I don’t)

or Satyajit Ray (whom both of us admire).

Luckily, perhaps inevitably, our friendship which was based on an identity of so many common interests, developed into a partnership of sorts—there are more than half a dozen scripts on which we have collaborated over the years—including *Doctor Kotnis ki Amar Kahani* (which was based on my book, *And One Did Not Come Back*), *Awara*, *Shri 420*, *Mera Naam Joker* and, the most successful of them all, *Bobby*. And we were to co-produce *Dharti ke Lal* (Children of the Earth) but the People's Theatre is yet to be born. And Raj Kapoor, the would-be producer-director of *Awara*, is still a strapping chubby boy, the son of Prithviraj Kapoor. Even the famous father I have not yet met, only admired him from a distance. So I have to restrain myself from anticipating the events.

Baburao Patel, following my example, went on a world tour, and left *filmindia* in my charge. I was free to write and edit it in any manner I liked, but I was not to tamper with Baburao Patel's specialities—the “Questions and Answers” and “You'll Hardly Believe” which were the most popular features of the magazine, revealing inside information, which was always provocative and only sometimes vulgar. Though we differed on the fundamental ethics of journalism, and sometimes even quarrelled, a strange love-hate relationship developed between us. Baburao trusted and respected my integrity, and I had a sneaking admiration for Baburao's guts in writing the sort of things he did, which were always spiced with gossip and scandal, and occasionally libellous. But, living in glasshouses themselves, the people of the film industry did not have the courage to take legal action against him, and there was only one example of a spirited star like Shanta Apte taking the law in our own hands when she came to Baburao's office and hit him with a cane she carried—for daring to write something defamatory about her.

Meanwhile I was film critic extraordinary of the *Bombay Chronicle*. I had a charter as large as the wind, and enjoyed sailing on troubled waters. Santaram followed *Admi* with *Padosi* which was, in a way, the first picture on emotional integration and national unity though the word “Hindu” or “Muslim” was not mentioned in it. Three-fourths of the picture was very realistic—the relationship of the Hindu and Muslim

neighbours in a village was very delineated—but in this picture, Shantaram showed his romantic and lyrical sense to run away with him, putting in songs and dances which were redundant. (Possibly, he was carried away by his emotional interest in the heroine of the Marathi version, Rajshri, who was soon to be his second wife and over whom he would dissolve his life-long partnership with his Prabhat colleagues, and migrate to Bombay!). Still the theme of unity came through powerfully, and I asked my editor's permission to write a first editorial about it. I wanted this picture to be treated differently from other films. This proposal was so startling that Mr Brelvi himself went to see the film, and only then allowed me to write the editorial which I did, and he did publish it, with only minor toning down of some of my exuberant adjectives. In those days of our national movement, newspapers, and especially their editorials, were read much more seriously and carefully than they are now, and there was an immediate reaction at the box office. Every one wanted to see the picture that had merited the first editorial in the *Bombay Chronicle*, as if its release was a national event—which, indeed, it was.

Sometime later (indeed, after the war had started) came the final test of a film's importance. For a long time my ambition was that if a really important film came my way, I would blazon its review on the front page. Such a film was *The Great Dictator* about which I had read a lot even before it came to Bombay. Brelvi Saheb and I were invited to the premiere (there was no press show) and before going there I had identical-sized blocks of Charlie Chaplin and Hitler prepared in advance. When the picture was finished, Brelvi Saheb turned to me and said, "Can you write a review of it quickly and put it in tomorrow's paper? I want our paper to be the first to comment on it."

I said, "On one condition—if you allow me to put it on the front page!"

He thought for a fraction of a second, balancing the relative importance of the news, and then gave his assent. I almost shouted with joy.

"What about the blocks?" he asked.

"They are ready!"

"You know that the matter must be composed, and got

ready before 3 a.m. for the paper must be laid to bed and printing started at 4 a.m.”

“Yes, Sir, I know that. But you will have to read the article in the proofs—I will not have time to give it to you beforehand, for I propose to write in the press, sitting by the side of the lino-operator.”

We reached to *Chronicle* office at about 12-30 a.m. and I rushed straight to the press. By the time the editor had climbed the stairs, I was sitting by the side of my favourite lino-operator, scribbling away on my little pad. It was 12-35 a.m. when I gave him my first page, by the time he had composed it, the second was ready. And it went on like that. By 1-30 a.m. the one-column article-review-news-item was composed, by 1-35 a.m. the gally proof was ready to go to the editor. By 1-45 a.m. it was back in the press with only minor corrections and two words scribbled for my benefit: “Good work. S.A.B.” I didn’t leave till I had the first copy under my arm.

I could have waited half an hour for the first tram, but I was too excited to wait, and too poor to afford a taxi, so I preferred to walk to my flat (which I shared with Basit Ansari) in Patanwala Mahal near the Victoria Garden—a good four miles. It was not the first time I had walked that distance, but it was the most fruitfully perceptive. It was as if my inner eye had been opened by the genius of Chaplin. I was walking on the footpath, careful not to step over one of the sleepers who were sprawled on the pavement. Men, women, children. They were not all derelicts, waifs and strays. Among them there were obviously men who could afford a bed with clean white sheets, and pillows with “Good Night” embroidered on them. There were others who had made a bed of newspapers, while still others made a pillow out of their arms, they slept on the base “bed of stones.” Near Bfendi Bazar, when I stopped to have a cup of tea and a bun, fresh and hot from the bakery, in a just-opened restaurant, I saw four people playing cards—had they played the whole night or had they resumed the over-night’s game the moment they got up?

Near J.J. Hospital, I saw a young couple sleeping, the boy’s arm was protectively placed over the girl’s shoulder. Here was a story! But what story? Love on the footpath? For ten or twelve years that story germinated in my brain, while I tramped

the footpaths, till I wrote "One Thousand Nights on a Bed of Stones," the short story which eventually emerged fifteen years later, as a motion picture, *Shehar aur Sapna* (The City and the Dream), which would get me the President's gold medal for the best picture of 1963.

My preoccupation with films and film criticism was such as to make me forget my first love and passion—politics! That is what happened to me before and even later. I take up one thing and soon tire of it, and take up another. I start making a film, and before that is finished, I am thinking of writing a book. I am (for instance now) writing this book, and before half of it is ready, my mind is toying with the idea of making my next film—though my last film, *Faslah*, has flopped resoundingly!

I knew that, in 1939, there were only eight worthwhile pictures, i.e., *Admi* (Prabhat—Shantaram), *Bari Didi* (New Theatres—Amar Mullick), *Brandi ki Botal* (Huns—Winayak), *Dushman* (New Theatres—Nitin Bose), *Kangan* (Bombay Talkies—Franz Osten), *Kapal Kundala* (New Theatres—Phani Mazumdar), *Pukar* (Minerva—Sohrab Modi), and *Sapera* (New Theatres—Devaki Bose), while seventy others were of the *Bhedi Kumar*, *Dekha Jaega*, *Garib ka Lal*, *Hero No. 1*, *Hukam ka Ekka*, *Leather Face*, *Midnight Mail* and *Zombo ka Beta* type.

And then one day, it must be 25 August 1939, I happened to walk across the corridor to see Basit Saheb in his office. He was sitting there, a thin short man, with his khaddar *kurta* sleeves rolled up, smoking his pipe. He took a slip of teleprinter paper from under his blotter and handed it to me.

It was the flash of a news item date-lined Berlin: "A ten-year non-aggression pact has been signed between Ribbentrop (representing Stalin) and Goering (representing Hitler)."

I was stunned to read it. Could it be possible? Could the Soviet Union, which had been in the forefront of the anti-fascist crusade, betray the cause by signing a pact with Hitler?

Basit Saheb told me this was what was called *Realpolitik*—the reality of politics! Tired of trying to mobilize the Western democracies against fascism, and finding them negotiating with fascists behind his back, Stalin had, by signing this pact, not

only forestalled them but bought time to prepare for the inevitable clash with Hitler. Basit was much more of a leftist than he cared to admit—or what the leftists (specially the communists) were ready to give him credit for. He was not a communist—but he was not an anti-communist. He was a cynic who preferred to take all political actions and words with a liberal pinch of salt.

“Now, let’s wait what your communist friends say to this?” And he rang the bell to order two cups of tea.

One of my “communist friends” whom he mentioned was the poet Ali Sardar Jafri who was my contemporary at Aligarh though a class junior. It was about him that I once quipped, “The communists exploit every single platform—including the railway platform.” He would often hold forth, explaining the current Party line, while walking up and down the Aligarh railway station platform. He was expelled from Aligarh University for his communist views, and later completed his course from Lucknow where he became friends with a Kashmiri student called Durga Prasad Dhar—or D.P. for short. The other was Sibtay Hasan, who was also an expellee from Aligarh, and had spent some years helping the famous Urdu writer, Qazi Abdul Ghaffaar, who was editor of *Payaam*, a nationalist Urdu daily from Hyderabad. Both of them were already making a name for themselves in progressive Urdu literature—Sardar as a poet, and Sibtay Hasan as a critic. (Sibtay Hasan, along with another U.P.-ite, Sajjad Zaheer, would be “exiled” to Karachi when Pakistan was established and the Communist Party needed “Muslim” communists to start the redical movement in Pakistan).

They were at that time living in the commune of the Communist Party at Raj Bhawan on Sandhurst Road, and one couldn’t but admire them (and their comrades) for being full-time communist activists on forty rupees per month, out of which they had to contribute twenty-five rupees for running the communal kitchen which served to spartan meals, and one cup of tea in the morning, and one cup of tea in the afternoon. But every afternoon they dropped in to see me—partly for old time’s sake, and partly in the hope of converting me to their faith. At least that is what, I am sure, impression they gave to their ideological preceptors.

When they came, and Basit Saheb ordered more tea and biscuits for them, while waiting for the snacks, Sardar casually asked Basit Saheb what was the news that day.

In reply, Basit Saheb drew the slip of paper from under his blotter and handed it to him, and waited in silence for their reaction.

Sardar gave the slip to Sibtay Hasan, and together they burst out: "Impossible. It can never be."

Then, one of them looked at the slip for a clue and found it at the end of the brief message: "Reuter."

"It is a fraud of the British news-agency," one of them said contemptuously, and the other assented.

Then both got up, having suddenly remembered something important which they had just remembered.

"What about your tea and biscuits?" I asked.

And they answered, "Sorry. You have them! We must be getting on. See you tomorrow."

I had a double helping of tea and biscuits, but the question kept me awake far into the night: *what next?*

The next day, the two comrades arrived, apparently relaxed, their minds set at peace. There was no sign of tension on their faces.

"Well, what about the Hitler-Stalin pact?" I asked them.

"Well, the imperialists deserved what they got. They wanted to trap the Soviet Union in a net of conspiracy with the fascists. Well, now they have been outmaneuvered and caught in the same net. It means that Stalin is smarter."

I felt aghast, and changed the topic.

I wanted to know what Jawaharlal Nehru felt about this volte face, but he was in China and communications across the Himalayan peaks were not easy. I was later to read his impressions of China at the moment:

I found, to my joy, that my desire that China and India should draw closer to each other was fully reciprocated by China's leaders. Often, as we sat in a dug-out and enemy planes were bombarding the city, we discussed the past and the present of our two countries and the bright of their future cooperation.

Earlier, a letter had come from Mao Tse-tung in Yen-an, Shensi, China, addressed to Jawaharlal Nehru in the course of which the Chinese Red leader had said: "We have had the pleasure and privilege of receiving the Indian Medical Unit. . . and the message from the Indian National Congress to the Chinese people, greeting and encouraging them in fighting the Japanese imperialists. We wish to inform you that the Indian Medical Unit has begun their work here and have been very warmly welcomed by all members of the 8th Route Army. . . . We take this opportunity to thank your great Indian people and the Indian National Congress for medical and material aid that you have given, and hope that in the future the Indian National Congress and Indian people will continue to help and aid us and thus together drive out the Japanese imperialists."

It was expected that Jawaharlal Nehru would go to Yen-an to meet Mao Tse-tung and to see the Indian medical unit at work. But Hitler willed otherwise, and launched the Nazi armies to invade Poland on 1 September. Two days later Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India, promptly declared India to be at war, without consulting a single Indian leader—or any chief minister of the eleven provinces enjoying provincial autonomy!

I knew then that Nehru would not stay in China. Soon I learnt from a Reuter's cablegram that he was taking the first plane back to India. That fateful meeting with Mao Tse-tung would not take place—yet!

I felt restless and dissatisfied. The war was still a remote phenomenon, the bombs were falling on Polish cities that I did not identify with, but I knew that, sooner or later, many of the friends I had made at Poughkeepsie would be involved. At this dramatic turning point in the history of India—and the world—it seemed ridiculously redundant for me to be reviewing pictures like *Alakh Niranjana* and *Laheri Jiwan*!

24. Kicked Upstairs!

While the phoney war continued between Britain (under Chamberlain) and France (under Daladier), both of Munich fame, on the one hand, and Hitler who was soon joined by Mussolini and the Mikado of Japan, on the other, we learnt to follow the course of the war on a large map of the world that was put up in the news editor's room. Meanwhile, the film industry continued to make films as if nothing had happened—which was a reflection of the general apathy towards the war. There was a difference, though. The German technicians of Bombay Talkies—Franz Osten, the director, Wirsching, the cameraman, and others—were arrested and conveyed to detention camps along with other “enemy” aliens. At last their young assistants, N.R. Acharya and Najm Naqvi, were given a chance to direct pictures which continued to be technically polished but thematically inconsequential.

The year 1940 saw the emergence of Mehboob Khan as a director of consequence with his first “social” film, *Aurat* which was a melodrama, obviously “inspired” by Pearl Buck's *Sons*. China had become India, and the “communist” son had become a “bandit.” But Mehboob, another of the brilliant “illiterates” of the Indian film industry, had an intuitive directorial eye, and his compositions, his framing, his editing and his use of songs and sounds was uncannily contemporary.

The same year, Damle-Fatehlal, partners of Shantaram, gave in *Dnyaneshwar*, their second saint film—their first was *Sant Tukaram* which was marked by a flair for realism which illuminated a devotional narrative. In *Dnyaneshwar*, they told the story of the boy saint of Maharashtra with a lyrical use of the camera that made it a memorable film. These Hindu-Muslim partners were no doubt inspired and helped by Shantaram, but being themselves technicians and artistes, the lyrical beauty was their own.

I had, by then, made a number of friends in the film industry—the most famous of whom was the late Motilal, whom I admired (since, as a student, I saw his *Lure of the City*) as the most *natural* actor in India, who acted as if he was behaving in real life and had been photographed by a hidden camera. Unfortunately he was used—or misused—in a number of characterless and worthless pictures, and it was tragic to know from his own *Chhoti Chhoti Baten*, which won a posthumous award for him, what a great actor, director, and producer had been kept frustrated and straitjacketed by the movie moguls.

Ashok Kumar, also a friend, was the reverse of Motilal—in the beginning he was no actor at all, only a gentleman, but in course of time he came to be the leading man *par excellence* and continues till today when, at the age of sixty-three, he takes precedence over all the matinee idols. I was also friendly with Snehprabha, who was one of the first college girls (the others were Durga Khote, Emakshi Rama Rao and Leela Chitnis) from an emancipated Maharashtrian household.

Besides these two, I knew Sashadhar Mukherjee, the sound recordist in Bombay Talkies, who (after Himansu Rai's death) would become a producer and would make for them a series of box office silver jubilee hits like *Jhoola* and *Kismet*—not to mention my first script, *Naya Sansar*.

There were others who wanted to make friends with me. For instance I was invited by a Muslim producer to his home, and when I reached there I found a number of other Muslim producers—not a single non-Muslim was present. I was surprised, for the film business, whatever else may be said of it, was and is essentially secular and non-communal. The mystery was solved when a direct proposal was made to me.

“How would you like to start a magazine like *filmindia*?”

I told them that one *filmindia* was enough and that I had no intention of starting a “magazine like *filmindia*.”

Then they came out with the real purpose. The *filmindia* was alleged to be pursuing a pro-Hindu policy (it wasn't, it was—and, in its reincarnation as *Mother India*, it still is—opportunistically pro-Baburao Patel), and so my friends were prepared to collect a lakh of rupees to finance a rival paper. And who could be its editor but Khwaja Ahmed Abbas? I politely declined my hosts and did not wait even for dinner. Later, I exposed

the communal game—in the pages of *filmindia*, I think!

On another occasion, a veteran producer of good, bad and indifferent films called me for tea, and broached the subject.

“Mr Abbas, surely you must have several stories of your own which might be suitable for filming?”

Caught unawares, I replied, “Yes, I guess I have one or two.”

“Then can you give us one of them? We will pay you three thousand rupees!”

Three thousand rupees was then quite a high price for a film story. Somehow, I smelt a bribe.

“But will you guarantee that it will be produced within a year?”

“Well, it may be produced—it may not be produced,” replied the producer, “what concerns you is the price. We will pay you the moment you deliver us the story—even before that if you want it?”

It was, as I suspected, an attempt to bribe me. But I decided to play the game—on my own terms.

“Well you see,” I said, “I want to know that you are producing it to be sure you are paying me the price of my story for filming. You can afford to give me three thousand as a bribe, but you won’t risk your three or four or five lakhs (the maximum cost of production in those days) on my worthless story just to please me.”

He made some lame excuse about, “We producers sometimes buy stories in advance and make their films three or four years later!” but I knew the deal was off, and I was glad of it.

One day I arrived at the office and found a chubby individual, a young man but somewhat older than me, sitting there, busy writing something.

“Yes, please?” I asked him, “What can I do for you?”

“You can let me sit here. Brelvi Saheb has asked me to share your cubicle for the time being.”

That, I came to know, was N.G. Jog, who was a lecturer of English literature in Sangli (Maharashtra), who had been lured by the prospect of journalism and wanted to make a career of it.

I was afraid that, being a Maharashtrian Brahmin, he might object to using the same brass *lota* that I shared with half a dozen other people. So I decided to find out. I rang the bell and told Gopichand, the amiable *havildar*, to get me some water. He brought the brass tumbler of water from which every one drank, pouring the water in the gullet without touching it with their lips—i.e., all except me and Basit Saheb who was also unfamiliar with this technique.

But that day I tried to pour water into my gullet in the prescribed manner—and got most of it on my shirt front.

“Stop it,” said Jog, laughing, “I am sure you have no pyorrhea—nor have I—so why shouldn’t you *and I* drink the water as from a glass?”

That was the beginning of our long friendship. For six years we shared not only that *lota* of water, the bell which had to be punched, the same cubicle and the same table, and many ideas and ideals, till we came to be recognized as a two-headed, four-footed, four-armed oddity in journalism.

The first article by Jog that I remember was about euthanasia—the painless mercy-killing of incurable old patients to relieve them of pain. In the course of this article he said his old father was suffering from a virulent and painful disease, (his whole body was paralyzed) and, while sitting by his bedside, he would often think of some way of convincing the doctor that in such a case euthanasia would be no crime but would be regarded as compassion. The occasion never arose, the father passed off by the will of God or nature, but the pain and torture of the thought of it was still there in those eyes behind the horn-rimmed professorial glasses.

Jog didn’t look the romantic type at all. I mean he did not sport long hair, write poetry, or put on lazy shirts. He was the staid, solid professor type. I was therefore surprised when he came one day and asked me if I would have a glass of lemonade. I said I had no objection. So he ordered two glasses of lemonade, and when the boy from the Irani restaurant brought them, he ordered two more.

He drank his in a gulp, while I was just sipping it. When the second glasses came, he ordered the third round.

I stopped after the fourth or fifth but he continued to order more and more glasses of lemonade. When he had drunk a

full dozen, I said, "Jog, before you burst, tell me what's on your mind?" I had heard of jilted lovers, drinking twelve pegs of whisky but this was the first time I had seen any one getting drunk on lemonade.

At last he said, "She is gone!"

"Who has gone?" I asked.

"She. I have just seen her off on a steamer. I don't know whether I will be able to see her again."

"Who is she?"

"She is an Austrian girl. She was here for some time. But now she is going back."

"Why did she have to go?"

"Filial love. She has her old father and mother there."

"Were you very fond of her?" I was reluctant to use the word "love."

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you marry her?"

"I loved her, but marriage is a different matter between people of two different cultures, of two different worlds."

There was silence for some time. At last he spoke.

"Abbas."

"Yes, Jog."

"What should I do?"

"I know what you shouldn't."

"What shouldn't I do?"

"Drink any more lemonade."

Some months later, he asked me one day if among Muslims we married our cousins.

I said it was not obligatory. But we might marry our cousins—in fact, many Muslims do, because cousins were known to them from childhood and many romances were born that way.

The third day he asked me what one had to do to become a Muslim.

I said it was simple. Go to any mosque and the Maulvi will ask you to repeat the *kalmah*—*La ilaha illallah—Mohamed-ur-rasool-al-allah!* And, hey presto, you are a Muslim. "Who wants to be converted?"

"I," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I want to marry my cousin—and, being Hindus, we can't. So we might become Muslims—and get married."

"Don't." I advised him. "A day will come when you will hate yourself for leaving your religion, just to be married. Find another way. There must be some country where such marriages may be allowed."

He told me after a couple of weeks that he was going off to Ceylon.

"Why Ceylon?"

"You advised me to. In Ceylon cousins might marry without renouncing the Hindu religion. Thanks for suggesting the idea."

I met his cousin, Leela, and I liked her a lot. She was good-looking, well-educated, a working girl, a journalist, and a strong personality. "She would look after Jog," I told myself.

After fifteen days of marriage and honeymoon, the Jogs returned and I had the first taste of Leela's wonderful culinary ability at breakfast.

It came one day—the golden serpent of temptation, wearing spats!

Himansu Rai had died, leaving an old friend—Sir Richard Temple—a director of the Bombay Talkies Ltd., to help his wife, Devika Rani, in the task of production. It happened that Devika Rani was displeased with a certain review by the *Times of India* film critic, the late Miss Clare Mendonca, and brought pressure on the *Times* management to get rid of the critic. The editor, Sir Francis Low, from one knight to another, said it was very difficult to get and train up a film critic and asked Sir Richard to search for one.

I had resigned from my half-time job in the Bombay Talkies publicity department when I was appointed film critic. But my personal relations with the B.T. management and staff remained excellent. So one day Sir Richard Temple—an old man but immaculately dressed in a double-breasted suit and hat and shoes with spats, like a caricature of British aristocracy—climbed the creaky stairs of the *Bombay Chronicle* office and knocked at my cubicle door.

He invited me to come and have lunch with him. He even

mentioned the Yacht Club—an exclusive place where Indians and dogs were not admitted. I said as much to Sir Richard. But he assured me that he had got special permission from the Secretary. My curiosity about lunching at the exclusive Yacht Club and, possibly making a story out of it, got the better of my national self-respect about lunching at a place where *normally* Indians were not admitted. I went along with Sir Richard, flaunting my khaddar bush shirt and pant and my down at heel shoes.

The club was not unlike the other Indian clubs which I had seen—doubtless the upper class Indians had borrowed the style of architecture and interior decoration from their British counterparts.

Sir Richard ordered port for himself and asked me what I will have to drink. I stated my preference—*aqua pura!*

The lunch was excellent, served by turbaned Indian waiters—the “no admittance” clearly did not apply to servants. Was I treated as a servant in being allowed in?

At last, after much humming and hawing, Sir Richard came to the point.

How much salary was I getting in the *Bombay Chronicle*?

I frankly told him it was a hundred and twenty-five.

How would I like to be the film critic of the *Times of India* on five hundred rupees per month?

Now I knew the game, for I had heard about the differences with Clare Mendonca. But I didn't want to endanger the big helping of custard pudding that I was enjoying. So I decided to play a cat-and-mouse game. Sir Richard was the mouse and I was the cat.

“It will be a safe and secure job like government service, with the chances of promotion as good as the civil service. . . .”

Sir Richard Temple thought I was as good as in the bag. He beamed a paternal smile.

“. . . Or just as bad!” I finished my sentence along with the last spoonful of the pudding, and continued, “I defied my father when he suggested a government job on All-India Radio as news editor. That was starting at four hundred fifty per month two years ago—by now I should be getting more than the *Times of India* is offering now. I am giving you the same respect—and the same reply—as I gave to my father.”

"Well, you know your interests better," he said suavely, folding his napkin. That was a signal that the lunch was over.

So I decided not to fold my napkin.

Plonking my unfolded napkin on the table, I also got up. Now was the time to deliver the last shaft into the knight-without-armour.

"Sir Richard, I would like you to know that it is not politics alone. There is also the question of trade union ethics. I wouldn't take a job which is being taken away from a friend and a colleague of mine. I won't be a black-leg."

"Well, well. We had an interesting lunch, anyway." He shook hands with me. It was clear that I wouldn't be going back to the *Chronicle* office in the limousine in which I had been driven here. I bid him goodbye and walked out, unnecessarily erect and pompously proud of my patriotism and my trade union ethics. At the nearby museum, I took a tram to Flora Fountain, and then walked the last few blocks to the *Chronicle* office.

"How was the lunch?" asked Jog.

"Good." I replied, and added, "The last course was the best."

I was still living in Patanwala Mahal near the Victoria Garden zoo, not far from the lion cages, and at night I could hear them grunting and growling.

Now (I don't remember why) I was not sharing accommodation with Basit Saheb, and had a two-room flat in the same building. The rent was forty-five rupees a month, (ah, the good old days when *pugree* was a turban and not a premium that you paid for a flat) and I shared it with my two flat-fellows—Shakoor Jafri and Usman Ansari. Between the three of us we represented the three angles of the political triangle.

Shakoor Jafri was a reporter in the *Times of India* which was then regarded as completely indentified with the government. Usman Ansari, an old Aligarh contemporary who had been vice-president of the union, was the secretary to Mr M.A. Jinnah. And I was the *Chronicle* man, very self-consciously patriotic and anti-imperialist. But we scrupulously avoided discussing each other's professional loyalties. For me it was enough to know that Shakoor Jafri was not a loyalist and Usman was not a fanatic.

Sartorially, too, we presented a contrast. Shakoor Jafri always meticulously dressed in three-piece suits, never took a tram (which he said was against the prestige of the *Times of India*). Usman put on elegant *sherwanis* which, he thought, was expected of him—if not of his boss! I went about mostly in khadi pants and shirts and chappals. But we were good friends, had cosmopolitan tastes and outlooks, and shared our penchant for progressive literature. The friends who dropped in occasionally for meals or a cup of tea included Sathe, Mohsin Abdullah (of the broken hockey stick fame who was working in Bombay Talkies Laboratory then) and Najm Naqvi who was a full-fledged director now that the Germans had been duly detained.

Meanwhile, my criticism of films was becoming more and more outspoken, disregarding all the warnings of, and restrictions imposed by, my editor. The result was that one day the Producers gave an ultimatum—"If Abbas continues as film critic we will not give a single inch of advertisement to the *Chronicle*!" The proprietor—who was a paper merchant who didn't know the difference between a slung and a beetle—was alarmed. He would be losing about ten to fifteen thousand rupees per month, all for the whims and fancies of a boy who had funny notions of art, and didn't recognize a box office hit when he saw one. He had given Mr Brelvi freedom to pursue his own line in politics (for that ensured a wide readership among nationalist minded people) but he was not going to extend this freedom to the criticism of films. "Give this fellow some other job—whatever you like, but keep him away from films," he warned the editor.

The next day Mr Brelvi called me and Jog together.

He said he would like us to give the Sunday edition a new, more youthful look.

I asked him what will happen to Mr Prabhu, the veteran, who was till then editing it.

He said he would be drafted to strengthen the writing side.

"You two will be completely in charge of the Sunday edition—you can start any new features you like—give me your proposals by next week. You will also get a raise in your salary and your status will be that of assistant editors."

"And what about films?" I ventured to ask.

"Oh, that will be looked after by someone else. In fact I have already asked him to take charge, as you are having the much more important work."

So that was it. I was being "kicked upstairs" to keep me away from films.

Was it so bad, after all? Was it not that I had played my part in this field and was now required elsewhere in another capacity? The Geminian, the twins, in me was even pleased.

We came away from the editor's sanctum and went into the next door cubicle shared by Basit and Padbidri.

"Congratulations," said Basit.

"For being kicked out of the film critic's job? Or for being kicked upstairs to be co-editor of the Sunday edition?" I asked.

"For both," he replied, and rang the bell to order tea for us.

Then he handed me a teleprinter sheet which revealed to me my ignorance about political developments. I did not even know Jawaharlal had been arrested. Here (the news item said under a Gorakhpur dateline) that he was sentenced to four years rigorous imprisonment—his eighth term in jail!

25. The First "Last Page"

We—Jog and I—started editing the Sunday edition of the *Bombay Chronicle* in right earnest. But, soon, we discovered that mere earnestness—without cash—was not enough to fill up the forty-eight pages of the weekly. Our "usual rates of payment" did not tempt any professionals with integrity and some standing in journalism to write for us. Earlier, the Sunday edition of the *Bombay Chronicle* was a scissors-and-paste affair. We used to pinch articles from British and American papers—on one excuse or another—with equanimity. But we were not happy with this state of affairs.

How could we induce good Indian writers to write for us? We tried our best. We made friends with D.G. Tendulkar who had recently returned after many years in England, Germany and Russia, and was an encyclopaedia of miscellaneous information. He came to the *Chronicle*, for he was then toying with the idea of writing a monumental and definitive biography of Mahatma Gandhi, and whenever Gandhiji was not in prison, Tendulkar spent a lot of time with him.¹ We provoked him (we couldn't tempt him) to write articles for us based on his experiences of the Soviet Union—later on, his articles, revised and enlarged, became the raw material of a book—*32 Months in Soviet Russia*.

Tendulkar was a bachelor and a colourful character. He went about wearing military-design khadi shirts and shorts, bare legs, Pathani sandals on his feet, a camera slung over his shoulders, and he carried an enormous portfolio out of which, like a magician, he would produce manuscripts of articles, books on different subjects that he was reading, and if he was

¹The result was the truly monumental eight volume *Mahatma*, by D.G. Tendulkar, published by Vithalbhai K. Jhaveri & D. G. Tendulkar, 64 Walkeshwar Road, Bombay 6.

with us at the hour of one, he would dig out of his bag hard-boiled eggs, slices of bread, a slab of butter, onions and pickles, and proceed to have his lunch, inviting us to join him.

He lived alone in a dilapidated flat in Kalbadevi for which he paid a negligible rent. The flat was chock-full of books, old and new, books on mathematics in English and German (it was for advanced studies in mathematics that he had gone first to Oxford and then to some German university), philosophy, religion, politics (three subjects in which he was profoundly interested and well-read), and on films (a subject which took him to the Soviet Union to study under great masters like Eisenstein and Pudovkin). I was not an ignoramus on the subject, having read *Film Sense* and some books on screenplay writing by Eugene Vale and Frances Marion, but after seeing Tendulkar's library, I came to know of the great minds who had analyzed, dissected, and propounded the different theories of film construction. After we became firm friends I had no compunction about borrowing books from him, in return for which my comparatively smaller bookshelves were open to him for any books which he needed for his Gandhi biography.

But there was only one Tendulkar, and at most a few such literary-minded men, with bees in their bonnets, who could be prevailed upon to write "at our usual rates"—which was then ten rupees per article (which we managed to supplement by using a large number of Tendulkar's vivid photographs which we were always careful to return to him after block-making). Ultimately we had to depend on ourselves. Jog had already started writing *A Week of the War*—a remarkable achievement for so peace-loving a man to transform himself into a commentator and analyzer of war strategy and the tactics of Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill and (in course of time) Stalin. Then I thought of writing a column of my own.

Actually it was not a column. It was a page—the last page of the Sunday edition—that was supposed to be a potpourri to accommodate the editorial left-overs of the Sunday edition—ends of verses and sayings of philosophers, occasional bits and news, comments and criticism, and gossip on a variety of topics. Originally, it was not intended to be a one-man show, and the first person plural was not an infringement of the editorial "we," but represented the collective personality of several

nameless "Chroniclers" who were supposed to have contributed the different paragraphs. Within a few weeks, however, for one reason or the other, the other collaborators dropped out and the page became solely my responsibility though the "we," along with the plural byline, persisted for some time. So long as I was in the *Bombay Chronicle*, "Chronicler" was supposed to have written the "Last Page"—but within a few months, the mask of anonymity began to slip off the Chronicler's face. Within a few years the pseudonym used in the byline became more of a convention than a cloak to hide the identity of the writer. In 1947 when I took over the "Last Page" to the much more flamboyant *Blitz*, with its tabloid layout, it was the first time that Khwaja Ahmad Abbas was proclaimed to be the author of the "Last Page."

The opening paragraphs in the first "Last Page" were written by N.G. Jog, and it is not modesty on my part to say that they were the best and the wittiest. N.G. Jog, as an essayist, reminds me of Robert Lynod and the classical essayists of England. Titled "We Eat Our Hats!" it was about the discomfiture of the war expert (Jog himself) and the foreign editor (Basit Ansari) at the invasion of the Soviet Union by Hitler's armies on 22 June 1941. "A colossal hoax," Jog had written in his *A Week of War*, "actually after Hitler had ordered his army to march into Russia!"

Actually, I was one of those who were not surprised or shocked by the turn of events. Despite the Goering-Ribbentrop pact, I knew that it was but a matter of time before Hitler would invade Russia. The basic contradictions between fascism and communism were so acute as to be unresolvable by the fig-leaf of a pact, specially when one of the parties was as undependable and unpredictable and as anti-communist as Hitler.

The complexion of the war was changed after that. America was already associated with Britain's war aims through Lend-Lease agreements even before Pearl Harbour, which came five months later. It was now, mainly, imperialist Great Britain, the democratic USA, the communist USSR versus Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and militarist Japan. While there was unity of war aims and ideology between the fascist powers, the

democratic-communist camp was divided, there were mutual suspicions and jealousies which delayed the decisive victory, even after USA formally entered the war on 7 December 1941.

Jawaharlal Nehru was released two days before Pearl Harbour, after suffering incarceration for more than a year. I was thrilled to read in the papers that, on release from Dehradun jail, Jawaharlal went directly to a public meeting, and began his speech with the words, "As I was saying. . . ."

The *Bombay Chronicle Weekly*, having been put on its course, I found time hanging on my hands, and a secret ambition slowly took possession of me.

"It is easier to criticize the stories of other scenarists," film people used to taunt me when I was a critic, "Try your hand at writing a scenario and then we shall see."

And, always, I would grit my teeth and say to myself, "I will show them. I will show them one day!"

Now that I was not writing film criticism, there was no compunction about my approaching a producer with story ideas. An idea was germinating in my mind—maybe autobiographically inspired—about a young reporter who had to make a choice about keeping faith in the ideals which he had got from his editor, and the latter-day compromises that the editor had to make to keep the paper running. A romance was worked into the main story—the young reporter was to fall in love with the ward of the editor, and a fellow reporter, whom the editor was hoping to marry himself. The battle between the old and affluent, *Sansar* and *Naya Sansar*, the small four-page treadle printed newspaper published by the impecunious reporter, was to be the climax of the picture.

Sasadhar Mukherjee, of Bombay Talkies, who had made quite a name for himself by producing *Jhoola*, *Kangan* and *Bandhan*, interesting and inconsequential romantic comedies, heard my idea and promptly approved it. He liked the idea of the hero being a reporter—it hadn't been done before. It would be an ideal vehicle for Ashok Kumar. He asked me to elaborate it into a screenplay. I was given a two hundred rupees advance with which I bought a new ribbon for my typewriter, a ream of paper, and a week's leisure from my *Chronicle* work—by taking leave without pay!

While writing the screenplay, I first described each character—Puran was a reporter who was a chain smoker, had a battered hat, whose room was cluttered up and never tidy, had the portraits of Jawaharlal Nehru, Tagore, Premchand, etc., on the walls. Asha, who was his neighbour having been put up with his news editor, Chacha Rehmat Ali, by the editor, when she came back with a B.A. degree from Banaras University; the reporter was dressed in pant, shirt, coat with a tie that was always loosely hanging, while the editor would be dressed in *sherwani*, *churidars* and Gandhi cap—just like Brelvi Saheb!

In a week, I submitted the screenplay to Mukherjee and it was accepted and I received five hundred and fifty rupees more for it. Seven hundred and fifty rupees for an idea—and a week of work! Of course, there would be more work to do, revisions, amendments, dialogue. But it would be a pleasure to work with Ashok Kumar and Khurshid Mirza (the same Aligarh girl whose photo I had published in the *National Call* now married to a police officer, Mr Mirza, who had allowed her to work in a picture—but stipulated that she should not compromise his family name, and so she was re-christened Renuka Devi). The editor's role was to be played by Mubarak Merchant, a young character actor, whom I took to Brelvi Saheb to see what an editor and his office looked like. Another key character, Mr Sharma, the manager of the paper, and a villain of sorts, was played by David Abraham, who was to become my firm friend, and when the time came, would play in most of my other pictures.

I vividly remember the encounter with David. We were introduced to each other by Mukerjee and later on met in the garden of the Bombay Talkies outside one of the sound stages. Both, being new, tried to impress each other.

"Well, Mr Abbas," said the actor (who only that day was declared to have passed his LL.B. examination), "what is your conception of the character of Mr Sharma?"

I tried to tell him that I didn't want him to look like a typical villain of the screen, with a fierce moustache and peculiar laughter, but something more subtle and sophisticated.

"That is what I shouldn't," countered David, "but what

should I look like?"

In reply, I dragged him to the office of the Bombay Talkies where Rai Bahadur Chunilal, the general manager, sat at his table behind the transparent glass walls of a large cubicle—so that he should be able to see who was doing—or not doing—what in the office.

"Take a look at him" I whispered to David, "That's what I want you to look like."

David, who had already met Rai Bahadur to sign the agreement, said he understood perfectly. He was as true as his word, and made of "Mr Sharma" a subtle but not ridiculous caricature of Rai Bahadur Chunilal—including his typical striped suits, the parting of his hair—and his insistence on being called "Rai Bahadur"—which became the newspaper manager's insistence on being called "Mr Sharma." Actually, Rai Bahadur Chunilal was rather pompous and self-complacent, a tightfisted hard taskmaster, but otherwise quite an amiable gentleman.

I had no reason to caricature him except that he gave himself too many airs.

Once, when I was working part-time for Bombay Talkies, writing publicity blurbs, he called me and gave me a letter from some movie magazine asking Rai Bahadur to contribute and article. "Write something—and show me—I will correct it and send it to them."

I wanted to see whether he would really correct it and played a cruel joke on the trusting Rai Bahadur.

I wrote an article favouring the nationalization of the film industry, and gave it a heading something like: "The Film Industry: The Crisis and the Cure—by Rai Bahadur Chunilal."

I took it personally to Rai Bahadur, and he looked only at the title page. "Very good, very good," he said, and slipped in into a manilla cover addressed to the editor of the movie magazine.

He realized what he had done—or what had been done to him—when on the publication of the article, he started getting phone calls from people congratulating him on his bold stand. At the IMPPA, of which he was president or vice-president, the producers told him that someone had written a

preposterous article in his name favouring the nationalization of the film industry. It was typical of Rai Bahadur that he defended the article, insisting it was no mistake, that those were his views. But he never again asked me to write an article for him!

I enjoyed the three months which it took to make *Naya Sansar*. Daily I went straight from the *Chronicle* office to the Bombay Talkies studio at Malad, and was often on the sets while shooting went on. I enjoyed every minute of it—we were like a group of boys and girls rehearsing a college play, and every meal was a picnic. The team that made *Naya Sansar* had more College graduates on it than any other comparable film unit, and it was exhilarating to participate in the work that would transform my story—the ideas and ideals that were the product of my imagination—into a film that millions would see one day!

The film was released at last, and for the premiere and on subsequent days I invited everyone whom I knew—about a hundred persons—buying their tickets myself. I calculated that I had spent more than seven hundred and fifty rupees on buying paper on which different drafts of the screenplay were typed, on the several ribbons of my typewriter, on train passes to Malad, and on the tickets that I bought for my friends who saw the picture. But it was eminently worthwhile. It was the first film written by me, and it had proved successful. In fact, silver jubilee hit.

The excitement of success went to my head, and in two months I signed three contracts with other producers who all wanted me to repeat the success of *Naya Sansar*. They even put *Naya* or *Nai* in the titles of their films—*Nai Duniya*, *Naya Tarana*, *Nai Kahani*, as if it was a talisman of success. But I learnt from the failure of these pictures that the story is important, but still only part of a film. Much more goes into the making of a successful motion picture—the way it was produced, the way it was directed, the way it was acted, edited and mounted, publicized and released. Moreover, my story of *Naya Sansar* had only been slightly amended—that too, in consultation with me—but the other producers (who paid me two thousand rupees, two thousand five hundred and four thou-

sand respectively) completely distorted the meaning and the purpose of my stories, and when I protested to them on seeing the end product, they flung back at me, "You will soon learn that writing is one thing, but only the director knows how it should be presented. If you want that your stories should be made according to *your* taste and in *your* style, *you* will have to become a director."

Nevertheless, three things I got from *Naya Sansar*. I got the approval and approbation of my father who, till he saw *Naya Sansar*, had seen only one film—*Daku ki Ladki*—which some friend of his had taken him to see, and which he thoroughly disliked. Thereafter, he saw no film. I took him to see *Naya Sansar* and he said, "You have done well. It has shown that good stories, too, can be made into motion pictures."

Then I got the award of the Bengal Film Journalists Association for the best story of 1941, which still occupies a pride of place on the wall of my office.

Thirdly, this film introduced me to someone who was to become one of my closest and dearest of friends, whose friendship I was privileged to enjoy for thirty-five years. Film criticism had given me my first friend—V.P. Sathe. The *Bombay Chronicle* gave me my second friend—N.G. Jog. Film writing gave me the third and closest friend—Inder Raj Anand.

The first thing about the new comer that I noticed was his inordinate height. He had to bend low to enter our cubicle—otherwise there was the danger of his knocking his head against the low beam of the door.

The second thing I noticed about him was his dress. He was wearing a long black *sherwani* and *churidars* and black fur cap, all of which further accentuated his height.

He said, "If I am not mistaken, you are Mr Abbas." I nodded. Then he turned to my partner. "You are Mr Jog, I presume. I am Inder Raj Anand."

"Glad to have met you," I said, shaking hands on behalf of both of us, "Please sit down," and indicated the only unoccupied chair. Of our room—or cubicle—it used to be said that it was so small that if one man got in, two had to go out. But in the case of Inder, it was as if two persons had come in, and one

had to go out. So Jog made some excuse to get out. "I will be coming soon," he murmured and left.

Inder Raj Anand said he had seen *Naya Sansar* at the Roxy that very afternoon, and decided that he must meet the writer and congratulate him before he left. "It is a writer's picture," he said—and did I feel flattered?

"Are you also a writer?"

"Of sorts," he said. "At least I hope to be. These days I do film publicity."

And he put an over-sized album on the table. There were cuttings of large film advertisements, mostly from Urdu newspapers of Hyderabad (Deccan). They showed taste in the choice of drawings, and the language of the advertisement was in chaste but flowery Urdu.

"So you belong to Hyderabad?" I ventured to ask. "But you haven't got a Hydrabadi accent."

"No. I am really a Punjabi—but for the last three years I have been living in Hyderabad."

I asked him if he had shown the portfolio of advertisements written and designed by him to some producers.

"Papaji—I mean Prithviraj-ji—has shown it to Sohrab Modi."

"What did he say?"

"He says it is interesting. Will let me know later. Didn't sound very encouraging. So I am going back this evening!"

"Must you?" Impulsively I uttered it. "I mean—have you got to go? I could give you some letters to friends who are doing publicity business "

I meant Nadkarni in Bombay Talkies and Ghanekar in Famous, the distribution department of Prabhat!

"I will be thankful if you will write them."

"What time is your train?" I asked.

"The train is at 9 p.m. I have to go to Matunga to get my luggage."

"There is hardly time to do that. Better go tomorrow after judging the reaction of these two."

"I will think about it."

"My dear Nadkarni," I wrote on the *Chronicle* letterhead. "This is to introduce to you . . ." I stopped. How should I describe him? I looked at him for a clue. He was smiling—a

smile which illuminated his strong and handsome features.

My pen raced on, "... my great friend Inder Raj Anand" I finished the letter and gave it to him.

He read it. Then, with the same smile, "Thanks. But aren't you taking a big chance describing me as a great friend of yours?"

"I will take the chance," I said shaking hands with him, and rang the bell. "I hope you will survive the *Chronicle* cup of tea," I said as I ordered three cups of *single chaas* from our Irani restaurant.

"You bet,"—or something to that effect, he said.

"Has your Muslim League friend gone?" asked a colleague after Inder went downstairs, and I had to explain that far from being a Muslim Leaguer he was not even a Muslim.

That was my first meeting with Inder Raj Anand.

In course of time he became a publicity chief of Minerva Movitone, then moved to Bombay Talkies and became one of the blue-eyed-boys of Devika Rani.

We would meet off and on, in a bookshop, or in Marosa's, a cafe specializing in good tea and pastry. Inder was an expert in pastry and patties for once he and his brother had run a bakery in Rawalpandi.

One Saturday evening I had in my hand a copy of the Modern Library edition of *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman which I had just borrowed from a friend. Inder also wanted to read it, and so I invited him home. "We will both read it through, if you don't mind keeping awake the whole night."

Inder, who had now taken to suits, took off his jacket and pulled his shirt out of his pants, and was ready and relaxed enough after a cup of tea.

I started reading it at about 7 p.m.

At 9 p.m. Saleem, my resourceful cook, reminded me of the time. So we had dinner, and Inder took over the reading.

It was about noon when we finished reading the book and, after lunch, we slept—drunk with poetry! We knew that our friendship was now firmly established by our meeting with a bearded American who lived ten thousand miles, and two hundred years away, but the cadence of his free verses had struck a responsive chord in the heart beats of two young Indians!

I was one of the first members of the Bombay branch of the Progressive Writers' Association which first used to meet in the elegantly furnished Silverfish Club, which was on top of the New Book Company. As the association grew, each of Bombay's different languages—Urdu, Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati and Sindhi—had associations of their own.

The Urdu branch of the PWA (as we used to call it) was meeting in the proletarian flat of Sajjad Zaheer on Walkeshwar Road, and it was there that I met and befriended the leading lights of progressive literature like Sajjad Zaheer, Saqdat Hasan Manto, Ismat Aapa (as we all called Ismat Chughtai) and her husband Shahid Lateef, and Razia Sajjad Zaheer who was known to me already as the daughter of a great friend of my father, and a worker-writer, Yusuf Mannaan, who used to be called "The Gorky of India."

Among these I was attracted most to Krishenchander (whom I actually met in Delhi radio station at about this time—later he also came to Poona and, finally, to Bombay). I was drawn to him not only because he wrote exquisitely-worded stories—poetic prose, as it were—but also because he was my own age, though much more handsome, and enjoyed great popularity among college girls. Envy—both professional and personal—was a part of the fascination that he exercised upon me.

The film industry had drawn most of these writers to Bombay. Then there were others—and Sajjad Zaheer, Ali Sardar Jafri, Sibtay Hasan were among them—who were in Bombay because of its being the headquarters of the Communist Party of India. Less than half of the members of the PWA were communists, but there was such energy in them and their writings, such mesmeric dynamism in their character and personality, such evangelical fervour in their talk, that they dominated every discussion, and thus the legend arose that the PWA was a communist "front" organization.

Soon, I would be connected with another so-called "front" organization—the IPTA or the Indian People's Theatre Association—but the person that set me on the road to being one of the founder of the IPTA was none else but the Oxford-educated elitist, D.F. Karaka.

Trying to be friendly and amiable, our colleague Dosoo Karaka said to me, "I read your book *Outside India*. Quite

interesting. I am sorry we never met in London, otherwise I would have liked to show you the city."

"Thanks."

"By the way, your book is being reviewed by Anil De Silva. She wants to make it a feature article, and would like to meet you."

And that is how I met Anil De Silva, the attractive Ceylonese young woman, who was then working in some Bombay advertising agency.

She came from an aristocratic and affluent family but the bug of Marxism had bitten her, and she seemed to know all the communists. (I don't think she ever became a card-carrying member of the Party!) In Bangalore, she had started a little workers' theatre, in association with the late Homi Bhaba (then a young scientist working in C.V. Raman's Institute of Sciences), who was later to become the world famous Homi Bhaba of nuclear science. Now she wanted to start it as an all-India movement. She asked me if I would join a group of friends who were interested in starting a workers' theatre.

"You mean a *people's* theatre?"

"Yes—the *People's Theatre*! That's a good name for it."

I was always interested in any activity that would do something to awaken the latent cultural energy of the common people. It coincided with my old interest in dramatics, which led me to play small roles in college plays.

But when I went to the first meeting which was to launch the People's Theatre in Bombay, I was disappointed. Anil had called some well-to-do Parsi ladies, a few professors, and a few trade unionists of Marxist persuasion. I didn't believe that such a motley crowd would produce people's theatre—or any kind of theatre. But, apparently, Anil knew better. The ladies supplied the money, the professors brought together a bunch of progressive intellectuals who could (and would) write plays for the IPTA, and the trade unionists established the liaison with workers' organizations.

The People's Theatre was born with a couple of Bengali one act plays and songs brought over to rouse the people about the Bengal famine. It was sent by the Communist Party of Bengal and called a "cultural squad." The communists were then in their people's war mood—the imperialist war, overnight, had

become, a people's war, since the Soviet Union was attacked—and it was to the credit of the Party and its secretary, Puran Chandra Joshi, that they made this, the most unpopular phase of their political line, the most culturally productive. One of the most creative outpourings of this phase was the People's Theatre, of which communists were the most active cadres, and I was to be the all-India general secretary—though I never became a communist, despite legends to the contrary.

It was after a People's Theatre show in Parel that I reached home to receive a telegram from my cousin in Delhi, saying, "Chacha Abba (Uncle—i.e., my father) Had Stroke Condition Critical Come At Once."

26. Life Amidst Death

Death was my constant companion during the next few months.

My father was already in hospital when I arrived in Delhi. My cousin received me at the station and informed me that half the body—on the left side—was paralyzed which gave some chances of recovery. He had been put in a special ward in Irwin Hospital. I insisted on going there immediately, though it was rather late at night.

When I reached my father's bedside, there was a young nurse feeding him with a spoon. He recognized me with his one "living" eye, and there was the flicker of a half-smile on his half-dead face. He could mumble in whispers. Asking me with a gesture—or half a gesture—to bring my ear close to his lips, he said, pointing to the nurse with his eye, "God's blessed creatures, all the nurses! What they do for me—not even your mother can do. But for them, I will be dead!" And tears came into his eye, as he thought of all the kind things the nurses were doing for his helpless body—feeding him, and massaging his back with eau de cologne, and giving him the bedpan.

"Now, now, Khwaja Saheb," the nurse put her hand gently on his forehead, "your son has come all the way from Bombay. You mustn't cry. Let him go and rest. And you also sleep. I will give you a sleeping pill."

Then she gave him the pill and a sip of water to help him gulp it down his half-paralyzed throat. I gently pressed the live hand, said something like, "I will come in the morning, Abba." My father bade me goodbye with a flicker of his eye and then gently closed it.

Most of our relations from Panipat and Aligarh, besides those locally available, were gathered to console my mother and sisters in their desperate, almost hopeless, vigil and waiting. They were all camping in the house of a cousin of mine in one of the semi-detached bungalows which happened to be near the

hospital. Most of them were asleep by the time I reached. Only my mother was waiting with the dinner: *shami kabab* and *masoor ki daal*—my favourite meal, which she always cooked whenever I came home from Aligarh or Bombay. Embracing me, she broke down. The *shami kababs* did not taste good that night, for they tasted of the salt of my mother's tears.

Next morning I went early to my father's bedside. The nurses had already sponged him and changed the bed linen and were rubbing eau de cologne on his back to prevent bed sores from developing.

My father was saying something, and I applied my ears practically to his lips so as to catch the message.

"They are angels," he was saying, his eye indicating the nurses "See to it that one of your sisters takes up this noble profession." Then he added, "She is also fit to be a nurse." I looked in that direction and found a slim silhouette against the open door. "She has been nursing me all the time."

Then, as she came in, I recognized her to be Mujtabai Khatoon, whom we all called Mujji. She was my second cousin from my mother's side, her father being a cousin of my mother. I was seeing her after a long time, and she had grown up a lot in the meantime. She was a B.A. student at the Aligarh Girls' College. I had never taken her seriously—regarded her as a precocious child, a bookworm with her steel framed glasses. Her elder sister was the one whom I admired, but a cousin of mine who was also my friend, had fallen in love with her and even married her. Now Mujji, who was a motherless child brought up by her father, was grown up, and had come from Aligarh to nurse my sick father! Was there a sign or symbol in it? It was hardly the time to think such thoughts, but thoughts (like sleep) will occur to one even in the last moment on the scaffold. There was no escaping thoughts—and feelings.

And so, while engaged in nursing my helplessly paralyzed father, now and then by a welcome mistake, our fingers would brush against each other, and we would self-consciously look at each other. That was all. More than that was not permissible, was unthinkable.

On the third day, my father called me by a twisted whisper and said to me to take out his accounts book. I knew this book well, for my father was in the habit of writing a daily account

of his income and expenditure—though the two items of daily expenditure which were permanent features were “In the name of God” (charitable donations from an anna to a hundred rupees—but the name of the receiver was never mentioned) and “Forgotten.” When charity exceeded the limit, it was best “forgotten!”

I took out the accounts book from his attache case and took it to him.

“Write today’s account,” he whispered, the words almost inaudible, “Now you have to write it.”

“I will write it, Abba,” I assured him, patting his hand.

“No, write it now—there is no time left. Hospital account must be settled. And the nurses—don’t forget to pay each of them a hundred rupees with my blessings.”

I said, “When you leave the hospital we will do all that,” and shushed him to be at peace, and not to agitate himself unnecessarily.

“I am leaving tonight,” he said and I thought that was a sick man’s delusion. Then he said, “See the last page of the accounts book.”

I turned the pages till I came to the end. Here the amount of loans that Abba had given to various people—his relations, friends and just towns people—were mentioned. The lowest amount was Rs 500—the largest amount was Rs 15,000. The total must have been about fifty thousand.

“Read it. For there is no other document,” he said and when I had read it, he said, “Now—tear it out.”

I looked at him. Then I looked at Mujji. Was he in delusion? Should I disregard his orders? She made a silent gesture—indicating by her hands that I should tear out the page.

I looked again at my father.

He was obviously displeased with my tardiness. His one working eye glowered at me. I did as I was told. I tore the page out of the book.

My father looked pleased.

“Tear it,” he whispered, and after I had torn it into two, he again whispered, “Tear it.”

I destroyed the paper. Now my father faintly smiled and whispered to me, with great difficulty, to this effect: “I wanted you to see it because if one of them gives you the money, you

won't be surprised. But give me your word that you will never remind them. That's why I wanted to see you tear it."

These were the last words that my father was to utter to me.

That evening the civil surgeon examined him and then called me to his room.

"Yes, Sir?"

He patted me on the back sympathetically, then said, "You have got to be brave, young man. Your father is proud of you—and you should be proud of your father."

That evening he was under sedation.

At night I thought he was sleeping, so I went home to rest for an hour or two. Only my mother and my cousin, Azhar, remained in the hospital.

I had hardly slept when I heard the sounds of women crying.

I woke up with a start. My cousin was standing there. He was holding my father's watch in his hand by the black cord which was attached to it. He put the cord round my neck, put the watch in my pocket. I understood.

A heavy mantle of responsibility descended on my shoulders. Not a tear escaped my eyes.

I went to my mother, embraced her, and then said, "Think of your children, Amma!"

Then I went to my eldest sister, older to me by two years, married to my cousin, Azhar, who was wailing loudly. "Baji, think of your youngest sister. She is in no condition to go through it."

"Ak-khan," I said to my younger sister, who was married to an agronomist, and who was now crying silently, "You have to look after your youngest sister."

This youngest sister, Zehra, the most beautiful child in our family, had been married only that year, and was now pregnant. I went to her and embraced her. I was relieved to find that she was not crying. But when I looked into her eyes, I saw such pain and such silent suffering that I wished she should cry out like every one else. I still wish she had cried aloud when my father died!

Returning from Panipat after my father's burial, I was in Delhi for two days during which I "covered Cripps." Many had hoped that the socialist Lord Privy Seal would be able to break through

the imperialist claptrap. But the Cripps Mission had virtually failed.

The meetings with the Indian leaders were held at No. 3 Victoria Road where all the correspondents kept an eighteen-hour vigil, judging the fate of a subcontinent-sized-country from how many hours or how many minutes Sir Stafford had conclaved with Gandhiji, Nehru, Azad, Patel or with Jinnah.

At the press conference which I attended in Room 101, North Block of the Secretariat, Sir Stafford Cripps showed off the *khaddar* slacks that he had acquired on his previous visit.

He delivered the valedictory statement, acknowledging the failure of the mission, standing in front of an open window, silhouetted against the bright April sky and the expression on his face could not be seen, while right there in the background was the Victory Arch and, beyond it, King George's statue. It didn't strike me as too hopeful a symbolism.

Back in Bombay, back to *Chronicle* office to receive the condolences of the editor and colleagues. Even journalists, I found, are human. But journalism is a huge, unthinking, unfeeling machine, a juggernaut, that cares not for personal tragedy unless it is big enough to be called NEWS. My father's death was not *news* in any sense—there was nothing remarkable about him except that he was a good man, an honest man who never deliberately caused physical or oral injury to anyone, but who was principled enough, when he was only thirty, to have staked not only his own life but the life of his infant son to stop the social waste in marriage.

The People's Theatre and the work to organize it provided some solace to me. The earlier spade work, done in the Silverfish Book Club, and the *Bhooka Hai Bengal* shows to collect money for the famine-stricken, had demonstrated the need for such a movement to use histrionics for the entertainment, instruction and inspiration of the masses.

It was an odd spectrum—ranging from the deepest red to the bluest blue blood—the unifying factor being the common desire to revitalize the Indian theatre and to use it as a medium of progressive thought.

The first president of the IPTA was Lt. Colonel (later General) Sokhey, the original Colonel Moti of Louis Brown-

field's *Night in Bombay*, the director of the Haffkine Institute, and the husband of Madama Menaka, an encyclopaedist intellectual who divided his time between snakes, dances and Marxism. Mrs Wadia, the philanthropic socialite, was the vice-president, and Anil De Silva, the socialist daughter of a Ceylon minister, and the well-known young Marathi litterateur, Anant Kanekar, were the two joint secretaries. Among the members of the committee were an art critic, a lawyer, a musician, a publicist, and representatives of students and workers. And a journalist (i.e., me)!

The formal launching of the movement was done, appropriately enough, on May Day with a Marathi play *Dada* by T.K. Sarmalkar, a worker-playwright who certainly knew the different facets of *chawl* life in Bombay.

In course of time, the IPTA became an all-India movement, with branches in every province, staged hundreds of shows, revived and revitalized dozens of cultural art forms (like *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Burra Katha* in Andhra, and *Jatra* in Bengal).

The communists were in it, and among its most active activists, as they would be in any cultural activity, but luckily they were not in a sectarian phase and seemed not only willing, but eager, to work harmoniously with non-communists like me. For the IPTA I first wrote a half-hour one-act fantasy play, *Yeh Amrit Hai* (Invitation to Immortality) in which a scientist who discovers the elixir of life is approached by representatives of different sections of society (e.g., an imperialist, a capitalist, a decadent poet, a society butterfly, a man of religion, and a dictator who was a cross between Hitler and Mussolini) but he gives it only to a worker who would not take it, for he says he is already immortal. The play was a big success as a curtain-raiser, and topical allusions could always be worked into it to raise laughter at the cost of any anti-social elements, but I was pressurized to write a full-length play. That is how I came to write *Zubaidah*, a play about a Muslim girl who eventually discards purdah to do social work. But the play was not yet finished when I got another telegram saying that my youngest sister was critically ill.

Zehra was the baby of our family—the youngest and the prettiest of my three sisters—and it was difficult to imagine her

involved with an incurable disease. Four months before my father's death, she had been married to a handsome young lawyer, who (and whose family) adored her. Her sensitive nature, however, proved her undoing. Being the youngest of his daughters, she was very much attached to father. His death left her literally dumbfounded—she was too young to understand the inevitability of death. A miscarriage followed and set in complications which no amount of medication and even surgery would resolve. She had been taken to Delhi where, comparatively, better medical help was available.

When I reached Delhi, she was in the nursing home of one of Delhi's ablest surgeons who was also a friend of my late father and of the family. I saw her, as she lay on her high surgical bed, propped up with pillows. She looked at me and she weakly smiled as she saw me. But she was too wasted with disease to raise his hand to salaam me, and was conscious of it, so I took her hand in mine and kissed it.

"How are you?" I asked her, trying to sound casual, even flippant.

"As you see me," she whispered and then held my hand, clutching at it with her bony finger.

I saw tears in her eyes and swallowed my own. The doctor came on his nightly rounds. He was an old man, but he kept up a chatter of cheerful talk that deceived everyone but the patient.

Tasawwur—he was my brother-in-law—said after the doctor left, "Zehra, today the doctor was very happy. That's a good sign, don't you think so?"

She nodded but it was evident she did not agree with her husband's optimism.

For ten days I sat on a chair, by her bedside, keeping up the pretence of noticing improvements in her condition that were not there. To keep my mind from brooding too long on my sister's fate, I either read Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or worked on the second half of my play *Zubaidah*.

One day she asked me what I was writing.

I replied that it was a play for the People's Theatre.

"What is it about?"

"It's about a girl, Zubaidah."

"Zubaidah! That's a nice name. Read me a little."

I read out the first scene.

As she heard the first scene, the encounter between the Hero and the old woman in a green *burqa* which he had mistaken to be *Zubaidah*, there was a smile on her lips. And then when the scene developed into the kurbside *baithak* with the old men of the town she smiled again and whispered, "That's Baba Miyan's *baithak*, isn't it?" (She was referring to my grandfather's sittingroom in Panipat).

I nodded, then I noticed the signs of tiredness on her face. Even listening to a play seemed to exhaust her. She had already closed her eyes. "The rest I will tell you tomorrow," I promised, collecting my papers, they kissed her on the forehead, and tiptoed out.

The next morning, I saw the nurse adjusting the oxygen tube in her nostrils. "It will make your breathing easier," she assured her.

The doctor came for his morning visit, and left soon after. I noticed him discarding his cheerful bedside manner as he came out of her room.

"Well, Doctor Saheb?" I didn't need to phrase my question.

He just pressed my arm, then patted me on the back. He, too, didn't have to say more.

That afternoon, my mother, who had aged considerably since my father's death, was sitting near her when I asked her to go and rest for a while.

I took her place and saw the bubbles rising in the glass tube through which the oxygen was being inhaled. I felt reassured.

With some difficulty, she opened her eyes. She wanted to say something to me.

I got up, took my ear near her mouth to hear her whispered undertone. "I like your *Zubaidah*. Don't let her die!"

Then she closed her eyes—but the flicker of a smile remained on her lips.

I closed my eyes and silently prayed for the last time in my life. "Oh, God, if you are there. Spare this child—she has not seen life yet—I will do anything if you spare her life—please, God!—please—"

I felt someone nudging my arm and opened my eyes.

It was my brother-in-law, her husband, who was tearfully pointing to the oxygen bottle.

The bubbles were no longer rising in the water.

I returned to Bombay but the manuscript of *Zubaidah* remained unfinished. Despite several reminders from my People's Theatre colleagues I couldn't bring myself round to finishing it. It was too closely associated with the memories of my sister, Zehra. Zehra and Zubaidah. Zubaidah and Zehra! Zubaidah had to die in the play. Zehra had already died in real life. Must the tragedy be repeated, at my hands, on the stage?

I mechanically wrote the weekly "Last Page"—about two Russian journalists, husband and wife, who were passing through Bombay on the way to Australia—the first living Russians I encountered; about progressive writers and Mama Warerkar and Sajjad Zaheer (*Communist Son of a Knight*); about Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber, joining the army to beat Hitler whose prize athlete Schmelling he had already knocked out; about American soldiers in India not finding snakes as they had been "promised"

And then my spirits were revived by the preparations for the meeting of the All India Congress Committee—the session at Gowalia Tank that had passed the "Quit India" resolution.

Suddenly it occurred to me that now that the war drums were sounding, why should I not join the non-violent army of Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad and court imprisonment. A few years—or a few months—in jail would do me good, lift the depression from my life, and give me a purpose and direction which my life badly needed at that stage. I confided my plans to some of my *Chronicle* colleagues, and was surprised (or not surprised) to find that many of them were thinking on the same lines. This was universally acknowledged as the last and final battle for freedom, and we were all anxious not to miss it.

Mahatma Gandhi was then in Bombay staying at Juhu at a place that would be known, after him, as Gandhigram. I had once written a number of "Weekly Indian Letters" for his paper in South Africa, edited by Gandhiji's son. My name had been recommended by Brelvi Saheb, but for the first four weeks I was "on trial," and my "letters" had first to be sent to Gandhiji who would correct them, cut out all the journalistic verbiage, and then pass them on to me for re-typing, and only then they

were sent to Durban in South Africa. For this service I was paid rupees five by Gandhiji himself, which one of his sons would come and deliver to me every week—despite my protests that to work for Gandhiji's paper was an honour for me and I didn't need any payment for it.

I reminded him of those articles in the course of my application for being enlisted in the non-violent army of Gandhiji. He received it on the same day as several other letters, all written on the *Chronicle* stationery. He called Brelvi Saheb and placed the letters before him. Brelvi, as a member of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee, was already on the list of satyagrahis, and when he saw that half a dozen of his experienced staff were thinking of joining him in jail, he was dismayed. "How will the paper come out in my absence?" he plaintively asked, "if all these people also go to prison?"

The next day he came back with Gandhiji's instructions and communicated them to each one of us. "Gandhiji has given a *fatwa*—I am using his exact words—that running a nationalist paper like the *Chronicle* is more important for the cause than courting imprisonment and going to jail. He would not like a single journalist—except those who are already enrolled—to leave this post of duty."

So that was that. I felt let down. Like a child who is denied the chocolate that had been promised to him! "Moreover," Brelvi Saheb added, "you know that a whole army of European and American correspondents are descending on Bombay for the AICC session and it is important that they should be contacted, befriended, helped and guided to tell the truth about our movement to the world. Who can do it better than our nationalist-minded journalists?" It was like a lollypop dangled before the crying child!

The two-day session of the AICC on 7 and 8 August 1942 is a part of history. I was among the battery of reporters that the *Chronicle* commissioned to cover it. We were all working day and night—snatching a couple of hours sleep on some office bench and table. The impassioned speech of the President—Maulana Abul Kalam Azad—in chaste Urdu was described to me by an American correspondent, sitting next to me, as "one of the world's great orations," though he could not understand a single word of it. Jawaharlal Nehru, who

moved the Quit India resolution, asserted that "If the British Government accepted the proposal, it would change the position for the better, both internal and international." The position of China and the Soviet Union, of Britain and America, would be better, for they would have the help, freely given, of India.

The resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority, only the dozen communists, still in the Congress, opposing it. Their amendment had already been lost, securing only their twelve votes!

It was then, after the resolution was passed, that Mahatma Gandhi spoke. I found him in a different mood on that day. There was a new timbre in his voice as he said, "I want freedom immediately, this very night, before dawn, if it can be had. . . ." And again when he said, "Here is a *mantra*, a short one, that I give you. You may imprint it on your hearts. The *mantra* is 'Do or Die.' We shall either free India or die in the attempt."

Gandhiji, while speaking in English, reserved the last part of his speech specially for the dozens of foreign correspondents. "There are representatives of the foreign press assembled here today. Through them, I wish to say to the world that the United Nations, who say that they have no need of India, have the opportunity now to declare India free and prove that *bona fides*. . . If India feels that freedom, she will command that freedom for China. The road to running for Russia's help will be opened. . . How is this vast mass of humanity to be aflame in the cause of world deliverance unless and until it has touched and felt freedom?"

The foreign correspondents specially the Americans, I noticed, were moved by this direct appeal to them. They had reported the speeches of the world's statesmen—Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, Chiang Kai shek—but none had thought them worthy of talking to directly.

After the session was prorogued one of them said to me, "Your Gandy (he pronounced it to rhyme with 'Dandy') thinks we the reporters are also human!"

It was about 10-30 p.m. when we reached the *Chronicle* office. Six of us had to report the day's proceedings, within three hours. Typewriters were clicking, pencils were flying over scratch pads.

By 3 a.m. all the matter had been vetted by Brelvi Saheb and sent down to the press. But our work was not yet over. Two of the reporters had been sent—one to the Birla House where Gandhiji was staying and the other to the residences of Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad. At about 4-30 a.m. we received a telephone call from a public phone booth that they were taking away Gandhiji.

“Where?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll find out.”

Then there was a second call from the other reporter at about 5 a.m. who said a special train was kept ready at Victoria Terminus Station to take away the Mahatma and the Working Committee members.

“You remain there—and see where the train is going and who are going in it,” the editor told him.

It was too late to go into that morning’s paper but, by day-break, while Bombay still slept, the train left, ostensibly for Poona. Later on, it was known that Gandhiji had been taken out at the wayside station of Chinchwad to the Aga Khan’s Palace at Poona, while the Working Committee members, including Nehru, Azad and Patel were taken to Ahmadnagar Fort jail.

I went home but by the time I reached there it was already broad day-light. People were gathered at street corners, reading the papers and discussing the developments. While the papers gave yesterday’s deliberations of the AICC the posters announced “Leaders Arrested, Taken To Unknown Destination.” On the roads, at intersections, an announcement was chalked in English, Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu that in the afternoon a public protest rally would be held at Shivaji Park which would be addressed by Kasturba Gandhi who had not been arrested with her husband.

Bill Fisher of *Time* slept soundly and peacefully, having worked most of the night on a long story about the AICC that he had cabled to New York via his London office when, after trying several times since morning, I at last got him. Poor Bill! He almost collapsed when he learnt what had happened while he was asleep.

“You are a good friend,” he growled at me, “letting me sleep while all this was happening! In heaven’s name, why didn’t you ring me up earlier?”

I told him the telephone had been "dead" for several hours. Perhaps, one of the police precautions!

"Where have they taken then?" he asked.

I told him that our information was that they had been taken to Ahmadnagar but were not supposed to publish it. I do not know how it happened but Bill Fisher was the only foreign correspondent whose story about Ahmadnagar got past the censors. It was in the next issue of *Time*—the same issue which had Jawaharlal Nehru's portrait on the cover. The copies of this *Time* were not allowed to reach the subscribers in Bombay.

It was announced that the meeting would be held at 5 p.m., so I and Sathe went to Jog's flat, which was in the Shivaji Park neighbourhood, at 4 p.m. to be at hand for any developments. We could already see clusters of people here and there, and posses of police mustered strong all around the Maidan. By the time we had had a cup of tea, the excitement had begun.

I had heard the phrase "the battle of freedom." That day I saw it for the first time. I not only saw it, I participated in it. All round the parapet wall of the park were groups of policemen, armed with guns, lathis and teargas bombs. Nearly a hundred thousand people were trying to enter the park from every angle and, except the few resourceful ones, were repulsed by lathi charges, tear gas attacks, and even by rifle fire. There were machine-guns mounted on trucks and placed in police cars.

It seemed the whole might of the empire was mobilized that evening to prevent a frail old woman, Kasturba Gandhi, from addressing a meeting of her people.

The colour scheme of the massive charade that was staged that evening was impressive—the dark blue uniforms of the policemen, the white helmets of their Anglo-Indian and European officers, the dark blue cars and police trucks, contrasted with the all-pervading white of the *kurtas*, dhotis, pyjamas, pants, *sherwanis*, and bush shirts of the people. I remember very few uniformed Congress volunteers. Everyone was a volunteer in this battle of freedom.

The strategy was simple. In one corner, a group of people would raise a flag, shout *Inqilab Zindabad* or *Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*, and the police from both sides would rush there and start lathi charging them, and hurling tear gas "bombs," and

meanwhile other people would rush in through the breaches on both sides, and the policemen did not know where to go—whether to beat the slogan-shouters, or to pursue the cordon-breakers. Meanwhile someone had found an antidote for the tear gas—it was as simple as water. From the building all around the park, came women and girls with buckets of water to pour over the victims of the tear gas. Men soaked their handkerchiefs in water and covered their faces with them. So, we had those white-masked non-violent “soldiers” marching against the lathis, and the guns, and the bombs, of the police.

Someone said Kasturba had managed to reach the park. Half a mile away we could see a white speck in the distance, and a spontaneous cry of *Kasturba Gandhi Zindabad* and *Mahatma Gandhi Zindabad* went up and unnerved the police who turned to discover a small meeting being addressed by Kasturba. So they promptly placed her under arrest and marched her off. This was the signal for general pandemonium. Men and women in white were entering the park from all sides, and the policemen in blue and their white-uniformed officers were trying to stop them. In all this excitement, I got separated from Sathe and Jog, and joined a crowd of young men who had got a flag and were raising slogans and singing *Jhanda Ooncha Rahe Hamara*. My feeble voice joined their mighty roar, but in that moment there was no feeble voice—there was no personal identity—all voices, all identities, were merged in the people, in the identity of national purpose. We were stopped by a contingent of police who attacked us, first blinding us with tear gas bombs, then raining canes and lathis on our heads and chests and backs. I also got hit with a blow on my head but in the moment I felt neither pain nor the blood oozing out of the injury.

I used to laugh whenever I read about “tear gas” being used against Congress volunteers. How could tear-inducing gas be effective against the patriotic resolve of sturdy young men? But today I knew better. “Tear gas” is a misnomer for what is really poison gas—though of a diluted variety. It not only blinds you, but chokes you. Coughing, groping blindly, almost stepping over the victims of the lathi charge and the tear gas attack, I came out of the park when two delicate and wrinkled hands, held me, supported me and guided me.

"Come this way, son," said a woman's voice in Marathi.

She guided me over the stairs of a house and took me into a room, made me lie down on a bed. The head injury was cleaned with cotton wool and iodine which made me wince. Then she applied a wet cloth to my eyes, after a few moments the smarting siezed. Now I could open my eyes—but saw darkly, as if through a glass. When the focus of my eyes was restored to normal, I saw the oleographs of Bhagwan Krishna, Lakshmi Devi, and Shivaji on the walls. In a corner reserved for Puja, there was the idol of some god—perhaps Vithoba—where an oil lamp flickered. The old woman was praying—perhaps for me.

In those days, religion was surrounded by all kinds of taboos and I was afraid I had been mistaken for a caste Hindu. I got up a start.

The old woman came to me and said in Marathi, "Why have you got up, son. Rest here for a while."

I didn't speak Marathi, but I could understand a little of what she said.

So I said, "No *maaji*. Now I am all right. It is night. I must go now."

"No, son. First you take some hot milk."

She brought the steaming milk from the kitchen in a brass cup, and I was so moved by her humanity that I hesitated to take it. I was afraid of defiling her religion.

"*Maaji*, I am a Muslim!"

This, I thought, was conclusive information which would induce her to have second thoughts about entertaining the unknown stranger.

"So, what of it?" she said simply, and gave the cup in my hand.

I drank the milk in one gulp and said, giving back the cup to her, "Forgive, mother, I interrupted your *puja*."

She said simply, "This is also *puja*, my son."

That night I reached home somehow and my cook Saleem rendered further first aid to me. Shakoor Jafri had come back with more stories of the countrywide reactions to Gandhiji's and the leaders' arrests. Kasturba had been arrested and taken to be with Gandhiji. But none of this news would be printed

the next day even in the *Times of India*. A strict precensorship on news had been clamped down.

Next day, I took a tram to Flora Fountain with a bandage round my head which I was exhibiting as a red badge of courage. I went to the *Chronicle* office. Gopichand handed over a bundle of letters to me.

There was one handwriting I recognized. It was my maternal grandfather's. So I opened that letter first. And, inspite of the head-injury and the gravity of the political situation, I laughed out.

"What's it?" asked Jog nervously, imagining that I had had some sort of stroke.

"It's a list of nineteen eligible girls," I replied.

27. The Taste of Marriage

The letter from my grandfather was no joke.

It contained the names and educational qualifications of every single unmarried and eligible girl in our family. It was amusing to find that he had not left out any one—not those who were much older than me and were spinsters, nor those who were half my age.

For instance number eighteen on the list was “Mujtabai Khatoon (Muji), 22, B.A.,” while the nineteenth was her kid sister, “Irshad Fatmah (Chhadi), 16, Matriculate.” I simply marked number eighteen in red and scribbled “If she agrees—I want to ask her,” and sent it back.

Behind this list that was sent to me there was a story of difference between my parents and myself. I was determined to marry at the same age as my father—that is twenty-eight—but my mother was anxious to marry me off early. Every year when I went to Panipat she tried her best to marry me off. But we were not agreed on the lucky (or unlucky) girl. While I was enamoured of an emancipated non-purdah-observing girl in Aligarh, my parents threatened me with dire consequences if I did that. They chose for me the purdah-observing Panipat-educated (we had a girls school up to middle standard) girls. So, year after year, there was a stalemate. (A year earlier the Aligarh girl had married and I shed some silent tears when I received the wedding invitation. I knew then that one did not necessarily die of disappointment in love!)

Mujji was placed eighteenth on this list because she was not regarded as good-looking, she was not fair like snow-white, she wore spectacles and carried a scar on her arm where she had accidentally scalded herself with boiling water. But she had the highest educational qualifications—she was a graduate. Yet she technically observed purdah, i.e., wore a *burqa* whenever she came to Panipat. So her name was included just to

pad the list, and her younger sister's name followed as a matter of course.

Everyone in our family was surprised at my choice, and thought that in our family it was unheard of that a boy should write to the girl asking her if she would agree to marry him. Normally, such letters were sent to the father of the girl. But Mujji's father had been different things in his unusual life—a police officer, a *Sufi*, a *yogi* who went wandering in the jungles to learn the secrets of *yoga*, and an alchemist who experimented with base metal which he hoped to transform into gold. He was an eccentric, a non-conformist, almost a heretic. So when the matter was apologetically referred to him, he said it was reasonable and sensible that I should write to his daughter and not to him. "After all," he said, "he is not going to get married to me!"

So I wrote a letter to Mujji in which I wrote everything to discourage her. I had been in love with another girl. My income was negligible—I was still getting not more than Rs 150 per month. While I had not volunteered as a *satyagrahi* I might be arrested at any moment for being involved with the underground freedom movement. "Still I invite you to share the adventure of my life, its joys and sorrows, its trials and tribulations."

The reply came a week later. "Agreed. That is the life I would like to lead—but I would claim equal rights to stand on my own feet."

And so, towards the end of the year—in the last week of December 1942—I and Sathe found ourselves travelling in an inter class compartment in a blacked-out train to Delhi. This was war-time, and trains from coastal cities were supposed to proceed in pitch darkness till they reached the interior. That is how Sathe, Chitpawan Brahmin of Poona, a born vegetarian, became a meat-eater—though the meat in this case was in its most innocuous form of spicy *shami kababs* which Saleem had placed in the same plate as *aloo ka bhurta* which I had specially ordered for my non-meat-eating friend.

Sathe asked me what was there to eat, and I told him that on one side there were *shami kababs* and, on the other side, was *aloo ka bhurta*. But the *shami kababs*, packed hot, had

disintegrated with the jolting of the train, and so got mixed with the *aloo ka bhurta*. In the dark it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. But Sathe obviously had no difficulty in making his choice.

It was very dark in the train, so I asked Sathe, "How are you doing it?"

"It is simple. What I am eating is *mazedaar*—tasty. Be it *aloo ka bhurta* or *shami kabab*, or both together, I am enjoying it."

In Panipat, the coming of Sathe produced a mild sensation. Everyone wanted to meet the "friend from Bombay." Even the women wanted to have a one-way view of him. My mother liked the idea of my bringing my best friend with me, and took special pains to provide him with vegetarian delights. But Sathe insisted on taking *shami kababs* from the non-vegetarian menu to supplement his own special fare.

The wedding was as simple as my father would have liked it to be. I refused to mount a horse, but I was willing to put on a *sherwani* and turban and even condescended to have the *sehra* or the veil of flowers dangling from it. Then about twenty of us set forth, on foot, for the bride's home, across the town. That was my *baraat*, with Sathe walking beside me as "best man."

At the bride's house we were treated with a little more ceremony. The wedding, involving two *maulavis* representing the two sides, took hardly five minutes. A *maulavi* went inside the *zenana* and asked the bride if she was willing to marry "Khwaja Ahmad Abbas son of Khwaja Ghulam-us-Sibtain for a consideration of Rs 5,000 *mehar*." The bundle of red clothes nodded assent. And then it was time for the *chhu-aras* or dried dates to be distributed. But later on, Mujji insisted that she never said "Yes," someone among the women had shaken her head, and so she could say that we were not properly married at all. And I would retort that that was all right with me, since I was free from the responsibility of paying her any *mehar*.

I was fearing this day for nothing. Marriage made no difference in the tenor and tempo of my life though I was expecting that, in some way, the pattern of my existence would mysteri-

ously change. Well, it didn't. The morning after the first night we spent together, I sat down to write the "Last Page" which I wanted to send to Bombay with Sathe who was returning earlier. I don't know what I wrote about that day—it was certainly not about my marriage—but it was finished after three hours and then I sat down to type it, finishing typing it by lunchtime. So, my bride became familiar with my routine on the first day of our married life.

We came to Bombay and stayed in my little flat near Victoria Gardens. Mujji had discarded the *burqa* in the train and she didn't seem to mind it in the least.

In Bombay I introduced her to all my friends. Brelvi Saheb invited us to lunch with his wife and graciously told me to take it easy. "You can prolong your honeymoon," he said. So I showed Mujji fifteen motion pictures in fifteen days, after which she had to go to her father's place for a short while. But I got her approval for a bigger flat near Shivaji Park. "The rent is eighty rupees," I warned her and she replied, "Doesn't matter. If necessary, I will get a job."

I did not do much work except to write my "Last Page." Three days before she went away, I told her in jest that I would test whether her presence was really "inspiring" in my work.

"Today," I said, "I must write the last act of my play *Zubaidah* which I have promised to read out to my People's Theatre friends tomorrow."

"And what am I supposed to do?" she asked.

"Give me tea when I say I need it—or when you think I need it. Otherwise, sit quietly and *inspire!*"

So I sat down on the dining-table after breakfast, and started writing the last act of the play.

At about eleven I felt thirsty for tea.

I paused in my writing and looked around. Before I could ask her for tea, she had it ready for me. But there was only the teapot and slices of lemon.

"Where is the milk?" I demanded, glad to find some fault in her service.

"Milk in tea will make you billious. You can have as many cups of lemon tea as you like," she said offering me cup with slices of lemon swimming in it.

"All right," I said, accepting the cup from her hand. It was good and fragrant and slightly sour, and it didn't give me a sensation of fullness.

Thereafter, I kept on writing, and sipping lemon tea. It seemed to accelerate my pen, whenever I would pause for thought I would take a sip. The cup was always full, and it didn't occur to me that someone was filling it for me.

By lunchtime I had finished the first draft of the play.

"Now I would read it out to you," I offered.

"You needn't. I have already read it."

"How did you read it?"

"Unobtrusively, over your shoulder."

"That's very unfair. When one is writing a draft, it is like being naked—it is only when a man, or a writing, is dressed that he or it can come out in public."

"A wife is not public," she said.

"What is a wife then?"

"A wife is very private—not public."

That was good repartee, I thought.

Another thought was worrying me.

"How did you keep the bores away? Or has not a single caller come today?"

"Several people came," she replied, "But I have kept Saleem sitting outside. Before any one can ring the bell, he gestures to him that Abbas Saheb came home late in the night and is sleeping."

"You liar—you diplomatic, delightful liar!" I was really grateful for her thoughtfulness in thinking of everything to make it possible for me to finish the play.

"Now I know what is the taste of a successful marriage."

"What does it taste like?"

"It is sour," I said and, after a pause of suspense, when I noticed her look of puzzlement, I added "like a cup of lemon tea."

The rehearsal room of the Indian People's Theatre Association was then (and for many years) in the little basement hall of the Deodhar School of Music. It was a part-time arrangement with Professor Deodhar. His classes ended at 6 p.m. and the hall was then taken over by us for rehearsal.

It was here that, sitting down on the floor, I read out the draft of my first full-length play *Zubaidah*. Among the members and sympathizers who heard the play were Balraj Sahni and Damyanti Sahni, freshly back from England and the BBC where they had come under the influence of Marxism. Also present were Chetan Anand and Dev Anand. Chetan Anand had resigned from Doon School, and was now seeking avenues of creative film work in Bombay. Dev Anand, after unsuccessfully trying for some time in films, had taken a job in the war-time censor office.

The most vociferous praise for the play came from Balraj Sahni, and so I said let him direct it. He agreed, and Chetan was offered the hero's role, with another role for Dev. Uzra Butt was to be Zubaidah, and her husband, Hameed Butt, an old Aligarh friend, was to be the old Mirza Saheb, one of the town's gossiping busy bodies who were seated on *mondhas* in the street corner *baithak*. I myself offered to play the old Meer Saheb, the arch reactionary of the play. Randhir (who was later to become quite a well-known character actor in films) was the Lalaji, Ojha was Master Hamid Ali, the father of Zubaidah, and the late Rashid Khan, from All-India Radio, was to be Hakim Bedil, the chief gossip and scandalmonger. Damyanti Sahni was to be Salima, one of the closest friends of Zubaidah, and Mujji agreed to be yet another friend of hers.

Balraj Sahni rehearsed the play daily for two months and, later on, staged it in the Cowasji Jehangir Hall like a pageant, with audience participation, and brought the *baraat*, complete with the bride groom on a horse, through the hall, on to the stage, much to the surprised delight of the audience.

For my part, I had to put on a beard and our make-up artist made it on gauze which was stuck to my chin and cheeks with spirit gum. When the gum dried up the beard would pull at the skin which made me look more ferocious—but helped to make my character even more detestable, as it was intended. But the four hours that I had the beard on, I could not eat or drink except through a straw, and my sense of humour suffered badly for when I tried to smile I produced only a twisted smirk.

The success of the play, however, was still to come in the future. I had just read it and was elated by the compliments that were paid to me, a budding playwright. Next day Mujji

was going back and, while seeing her off at the station, I told her not to spend too much time at home.

"Why?" she coyly asked me.

"Well, you have agreed to play a part in *Zubaidah*" I said, "and it will be letting them down if you are late."

"Is there no other reason?" she asked as the train started to move.

I had to shout my answer, while running beside the moving train.

"Yes, there is. I need you."

She shouted, quite shamelessly, much to the surprise of the other ladies in the compartment, "Then I will come soon to give you your lemon tea."

With Mujji out of the way (though it seemed her absence was in the way of much of my work), I managed to change our flat, and concentrated on my *Chronicle* work and my chores for the Congress underground.

One of the jobs assigned to me (I never asked by whom) was to record the news bulletins which were then transmitted from somewhere else. Everytime they were recorded and transmitted from a different place—on the second floor of a jeweller's shop where there was an arrangement that in case any one suspected to be a policeman was seen entering the shop, one of the assistants would press a button hidden under his counter to warn those of us who were busy recording; or on the fourth floor terrace of a building on Walkeshwar Road where there was no staircase, only a lift, which would be taken up and "broken down" by the simple expedient of keeping the door open. Another place which I remember was a coal cellar, the way to which went through a very orthodox Jaini kitchen in a bungalow near French Bridge.

This place was almost opposite to Doctor Baliga's nursing home which, itself, was a hide-out for many of the socialist underground workers. Whenever I happened to go to Dr Baliga, I was not sure who would emerge from the consulting room—a patient with cancer of the kidneys, or a Socialist worker, swathed in bandages which made detection of his identity impossible, and who was registered as a critical surgical case in the books of the nursing home.

I knew Dr Baliga rather well through Brelvi Saheb. One day, after the recording, I just walked across to the nursing home and wrote my name on a slip which was handed in to the doctor. "K.A. Abbas—critical condition." The doctor immediately called me in.

"What's wrong with you, Abbas?"

I knew Dr Baliga had a tremendous sense of humour, and decided to test it. "Doctor Saheb, I am losing my hair on the top—it's very serious."

Baliga very seriously examined my balding pate and then smacked me with his hand. "Damn fool, you have only to look at me and know there is no cure for baldness."

I told him that I had come "somewhere near" for recording (he knew exactly where) and thought I would take a chance to call on the doctor. "I have nothing more serious than my chronic cold."

"Do you know there are cancer and T.B. patients waiting out there," pointing to the waiting room, adding, "Chronic cold? I tell you it's the *Chronicle* cold!" And he laughed.

Then, more seriously, he said, "You have some friends in the CPI."

I knew he meet the Communist Party of India. So I named several including Sajjad Zaheer, Mehmood-uz-Zafar, Sibtay Hasan and Sardar Jafri, most of whom were also known to Baliga.

"None of them, evidently, seems to recognize your voice!" He said, placing before me a new issue of *People's War*, which had a paragraph saying that the Nazis had started broadcasting from somewhere in Germany "on a powerful transmitter" in the name of the Congress Radio.

"So what should I do?"

"Go there and have a cup of tea. Ask them if they listen in to the clandestine Congress Radio and then enjoy the fun."

I knew what he meant. But I also knew the bitter communist-socialist feud, each accusing the other of "betrayl," and so I said, "But won't they pass on the information to the police?"

Doctor Baliga, who seemed to know both the camps, said with conviction. "They are fools. But they will never do that. I know them!"

I went over to Raj Bhawan, the CPI office on Sandhurst Road in Girgaum. There I met Ali Sardar Jafri and Sibtay Hasan and had tea with them in the Irani restaurant downstairs.

"Do you hear the Congress Radio?" I asked them.

"We don't. But the monitor does. It is so powerful that it is clearly audible as if it was located in Bombay."

"Is it not possible that it is located in Bombay?"

"Impossible. Don't you think we would know the difference?"

"But *we*—i.e., you—have not heard it! Why not hear it once and then be convinced. You will find no Nazi or fascist propaganda from the Congress Radio."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Sibtay, "Have you something"

"Shshsh" I silenced him with a real conspiratorial shush, "Walls have CID's hidden behind them. And now I must go." I said getting up and insisting on paying the three annas for the three cups of tea.

Three days later Sibtay met me and said, "I heard the Congress Radio last night. I agree with you," he said lowering his voice, "But *you* have to be careful."

Our editor asked us one day, "Do you know which is the best-edited weekly in Bombay?"

I said, "Possibly the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, the Times group's weekly journal."

"No, it's the *People's War*. I read it every week—so must each of you to get ideas for make-up, lay out, illustrations, cartoons."

It was, indeed, remarkable that, pursuing an unpopular people's war line, they had made a success of their paper which they were publishing openly for the first time in India.

I asked Brelvi Saheb, "Shall I interview P.C. Joshi for the 'Last Page'?"

"Yes, you might. But don't get carried away by his eloquence. We don't want to lose you. He is a very convincing talker."

So, I made an appointment with P.C. Joshi through my friends in the *Qaumi Jung*, and presented myself at his office on the first floor of the old and old-style building which was, oddly enough, named Raj Bhawan.

The first thing that struck me about the office were the flags arranged in ladder-like formation, in this order, from top to bottom: the national tricolour of India, the red flag of the Soviet Union, the white star-on-blue of China, and the white-crescent-on-green of Pakistan—but it was only 1943 and there was no Pakistan, it was the flag of the Muslim League!

There were two tables strewn with fairly orderly journalistic paraphernalia. A few chairs for visitors and a narrow couch-bed with rather unproletarian Japanese silk cushions. That was all. But in the adjacent rooms could be observed a staff of a dozen sub-editors, two typists, clerks, a radioset, a small library of Marxist books. This was an office of the editor of the weekly *People's War*—and its three editions in Hindi, Urdu and Marathi. It was also the headquarter of the Communist Party of India—more popularly known by its initials: CPI.

A year ago, if the police had managed to locate these premises, one would have read in the newspapers handlines to the effect that “Red Den is Discovered in City.” But today the CPI was legal, and its activities might be carried on in broad daylight. This was one of the many contradictions implicit in the present situation—ex-ministers were in jail, ex-conspirators free; bourgeoisie papers had to close down, while communist papers flourished and could be sold openly even to British “Tommies” and American “G.I.s” the revolutionaries of yesterday with a price on their head were war-effort-wallahs of today, flattered by the authorities.

These contradictions meant no *volta face* on the part of the communists, no betrayal of the masses nor sell-out to the imperialists. They were the product of the world war, which itself was the greatest contradiction. Churchill and Stalin, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung, Roosevelt and Earl Browder, Rajagopalachari and Puran Chandra Joshi—the alignments produced by the war were unimaginable, impossible, a year ago!

Communism had created friction even in the staunchest Congress households. One of the young lieutenants of P.C. Joshi was Oxford-educated Mohan Kumarmangalam,¹ son of

¹Mohan Kumarmangalam was to become the first Marxist Advocate General of Madras, and later the steel minister in Indira Gandhi's cabinet when he was killed, along with others, in an air accident near Delhi.

Doctor Subbaroyan, the Congress Minister of Madras.

Kumaon-born, pleasant-featured, shortish, quick-spoken, deeply-read in Marxist ideology, tea addict P.C. Joshi—P.C. to all his comrades—was one of the most interesting, if not the most important, of the political personalities of war-time India. He had spent long years in jail (since the Meerut conspiracy case) and, at other times, he had to live ‘underground’, yet he had managed to preserve a youthful appearance and a youthful enthusiasm to match. I noted that his Marxist didacticism, bordering on fanaticism, was not offensive; on the contrary, it compelled admiration.

The “Last Page” was the first to break the blackout on the communists though I had serious differences with the Pakistan and the People’s War policies of the CPI. But I could not help admiring the Party which had been so much criticized, condemned, abused and yet whose leaders retained their sense of perspective, and their sense of humour.

I asked Joshi if it was true that for two months after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, his Party continued to call it an imperialist war from which Indians should keep aloof. He admitted it, explaining that they took time fully to understand, discuss and clarify the world situation—a task which was made difficult by some members being in jail and other “underground.” It was after due deliberations that they decided to raise the “People’s War” slogans.

“Meanwhile,” I said, “instructions must have been received from Moscow and London?”

He repudiated the suggestion emphatically. “The Communist Party of India,” he said, “is a much more important and influential body than the Communist Party of Great Britain.” He added that as early as 1934 the Communist International had declared that no instructions would be issued to national parties in various countries, which were to determine the policies according to their own circumstances.

The Muslim League’s concept of Pakistan, admitted Joshi, was not the same thing as the self-determination of nationalities patterned on the Soviet model which the communists had advocated.

On the issue of “Quit India,” said Joshi, the communists were hundred per cent with the Congress. Imperialism must end

in India, and a national government immediately formed to mobilize the people against the invaders.

I quoted a distinguished right wing Congress leader towards the conclusion of the "Last Page": "I hate communism. But I must confess that the communists are the sincerest and most selfless political workers in India."

Printed under the heading "Lenin Smiles," I concluded the "Last Page" with this paragraph:

As I bade goodbye to Comrade Joshi and looked up at the wall above him I could distinctly see Lenin smiling even if there was a frown on the brow of Stalin:

Intelligent anticipation of the Khrushchev Report at the Twentieth Congress in Moscow in 1956, or presentiment of the controversy that would rock the communist edifice?

P.C. Joshi and I were to become good friends thereafter which endured and survived the many upheavals in the Party and its dogma, when P.C. would know that personal integrity surmounts ideological differences.

Ever since the first "Last Page" appeared, I have spent Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, marking with red pencil all important and "writable" items in about half a dozen daily newspapers. Out of all these clippings which I read again, one or two items might be important enough to be written about.

In February 1943, after Mujji had returned to Bombay and settled down in our new flat, I was one day going through the papers that she pointed out a small, obscure, 3-line news item date-lined Chungking. It announced the death, in Yen-an, of Dr Dwarkanath Kotnis, member of the Congress medical mission sent by Jawaharlal Nehru. The Indian doctors had been sent to various fronts, I knew from an earlier report, that only two of them—Dr Kotnis and Dr Basu—had been assigned to the Eighth Route Army of General Chu Teh, and of these only one—Dr Kotnis—was in Yen-an. He was married to his Chinese assistant who had borne him a son.

I imagined the last moments of the life of Dr Kotnis, the youngest member of the Medical Unit, and dramatized his death for a full "Last Page."

Far away in the interior of China a man lay dying in the ghostly hour that precedes dawn in those hills of the North-West

. . . the man was young—even the creeping shadow of death could not obscure the features of the handsome young face.

. . . the man who was dying was a Doctor—a healer of men!

. . . the man who was dying in obscure village in the interior of China, who was admired by the Chinese Generals, and loved by the Chinese people, was not a Chinese. He was an Indian. His name was Dwarkanath S. Kotnis.

By the side of the death-bed sat, mute and grief-stricken, a young Chinese woman—wife of the Indian doctor whom he had married in China. In her arms she held the infant son—the little symbol of Indo-Chinese unity

It was one of my best “Last Pages,” for I felt the tragedy of Kotnis keenly. Later, when Doctor Basu returned to India, he read the article and came to see me, wondering how I had managed to write of Kotnis’ last moments so factfully and so faithfully.

That gave me an idea of a book—the grand saga of the five-doctor Indian medical mission which went to China, and one of them did not come back. That was a good title for my book—*And One Did Not Come Back!*

I had a marathon interview with Dr Basu to get the details of the mission and its odyssey across China, read a score of books by old China hands like Edgar Snow and Rewi Alley and the late Dr Lin Yutang and Pearl Buck to get the colour and the feel of China at war. Inspired by my wife, and sustained by her cups of lemon tea, I wrote the little book at a stretch in less than two months, and then gave it to my friend Sathe to read.

Sathe read it through at one sitting and told me that here I had a thrilling saga of war and adventure which would make a timely and topical film.

“But who would make an Indo-Chinese film with these dimensions?” I interjected.

“I know who is looking for just such a story—Shantaram!”

Sathe made an appointment with Shantaram. He merely told

him, "Abbas has a story which he would like to read to you."

He asked me not to reveal in the beginning that it was a true story. So it was as a fictitious adventure story that Shantaram heard from me the completed script of *And One Did Not Come Back*.

"Great" was Shantaram's comment at the end of my reading. "I will make it. Just as you have written it."

It was then that I told him that every word that he had heard was true.

"Is that so?" asked the great director, and when I assured him that it was, he said, "That gives me an idea. I will submit your book to the government as a script for a war-effort film which they have made compulsory for every producer licensed to make three films."

Next day we—I and Sathe—started writing the screenplay for which we had a conference with Shantaram in the morning, and the next day I read out what I had written. On the very first day he was not impressed and said, "Why get entangled in technical details? Write *emotionally*—like in your book. If you don't move me emotionally, how am I to move the millions of cinegoers?"

That is how *Doctor Kotnis ki Amar Kahani* (in English it was called *The Journey of Doctor Kotnis*) came to be written and produced by Shantaram, with himself playing the leading role.

About a year later, on the day the picture was premiered, I told Mujji, "It is all due to you—this book and this picture!"

"What have I done?" she asked.

"You gave me the news item on which I based the "Last Page," and you inspired me to write the book with your lemon tea—that had the taste of marriage. Slightly sweet. Slightly sour!"

28. A Nehru Who was a Gandhi!

I wish I could say that on a certain day in early March 1944, when I saw Indira (Nehru) Gandhi for the first time in my life, from a moving train at the Allahabad railway station where she had come along with her husband, Feroze Gandhi, I immediately knew that she was the future Prime Minister of India. But it would not be true.

I had not even come to see her. I had travelled two thousand five hundred miles—from Bombay to Delhi to Calcutta to Allahabad—to see the late Lin Yutang, who was then one of my favourite authors. The moment I had learnt that he was in India, I had pursued him, missing him in Delhi and arriving in Calcutta the same morning that he was to leave for Allahabad (as he said) “to pay my respects to the spirit of Nehru who is unapproachable behind prison bars.”

I travelled with the late Dr Lin in the same compartment from Howrah to Allahabad, and had an opportunity to study him at close quarters.

The most striking thing about him was that there was nothing very striking about him. He was not tall, but he was not short, either. His complexion was fair like all Chinese, his eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses were small but twinkling with interest in life. He had a receding hair line but, at forty-nine, he was not bald. Like intellectuals and philosophers all over the world, he neglected his haircut which (according to *Our Family*, a book written by his children) created quite a domestic crisis between Dr Lin and Mrs Lin.

In the train, I discovered he carried no bedding with him—not even sleeping pyjamas. At night he rolled himself in a beautiful, long, silk-lined Chinese gown which, he insisted, was more than enough covering for him. He had been travelling by aeroplanes and had to dispense with a lot of things to be able to carry an ever increasing bundle of books in the strictly limit-

ed weight he was allowed to carry with him.

Also, I noticed that the author of *The Importance of Living* was a great believer in relaxation. No sooner had the train started than he removed his shoes and put on a pair of comfortable featherweight Chinese slippers. Then, reluctantly accepting a pillow from me which I took out of my holdall, he stretched himself on the berth. He even insisted on my doing likewise and relaxing for a while. "After an hour's rest, we shall talk," he said and closed his eyes. An hour later, he got up, feeling fresh, and resumed his talk with me, taking up the thread exactly where it had been interrupted.

He even read through the galley proofs of my book *And One Did Not Come Back* before dinner and afterwards wrote a brief preface to it which he might have regretted later as he was not very fond of the Chinese communists, though (like the Chiang government) tolerating them as war-time allies. But at that time neither the communists nor the anti-communists were making an issue of it. The war came before everything else.

Late next morning our train steamed into the bustling Allahabad railway station. As usual, there was a great crowd there, but nevertheless (from their photographs) I recognized the frail Indira, dressed in khadi *salwar-kameez* and her portly husband, Feroze Gandhi, and assured Dr Lin that his host and hostess were there to receive him.

When the train stopped and Lin Yutang stepped out, he shook hands with Indira and Feroze and then proceeded to introduce me.

"We know you by your writings, of course," Feroze assured me, while Indira gave me smile to endorse her husband's statement.

My idea was to take the next train to Bombay, so when Indira asked me where I was going to put up, I said "The waitingroom at the station, for I am going back to Bombay."

Indira and Feroze looked at each other, a silent gesture, and then Indira said, "You can stay with us and take the train to Bombay tomorrow morning."

I had work to do in Bombay, but I couldn't say no to this chance of staying, at least for a night, in the house of Jawaharlal Nehru with all its hoary and historic associations. So I too readily accepted the invitation of Nehru's daughter about

whose Monkey Brigade during the civil disobedience movement I heard, and even told Lin Yutang about it.

Anand Bhawan, the house that Motilal Nehru had built for his large family, marked a *sangam*, the confluence of two ways of living—of the gracious, generous, somewhat leisurely, but life-giving cultured charm that was Motilal's, and the tempestuous, dynamic, fast-flowing current of impatient idealism that was Jawaharlal Nehru.

In the sittingroom, designed for large family gatherings and hosts of friends, Lin Yutang found evidence of the empathy for China that Nehru always felt. There was a photograph of the Chiangs signed in Chinese, another of the Sun Yat-sens, signed in English: "For Mr Nehru—Soong Chingling." On the walls were Chinese scrolls and paintings, beside the portraits of the two Nehrus, Motilal and Jawaharlal.

Upstairs, in the huge library, were shelves reaching up to the ceiling, filled, in Nehru's words, "with the wisdom of the ages, the scepticism of the present, and glimpses of the glory that is to be." Lin Yutang was pleased to discover some of his books, and I was flattered by my *Outside India* beside the great John Gunther's *Inside Europe*.

To this house, in the past, had come men and women of eminence and goodwill from all parts of India and from every corner of the earth—political leaders, Congress workers, Ansari, Sapru and Malaviya, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu, Cripps and Eve Curie, and John Gunther and Louis Fischer. But the heir to the late Motilal Nehru's estate was oftener to be found in a prison cell than in this pleasant home. Since August 1942, there had been many months when the entire house was shut up and, like a forsaken widow, lay sunk in gloomy silence. It was only recently that life had returned to it since the fragile Indira and her pleasant-mannered young husband were released from imprisonment. But Anand Bhawan was not built for a solitary couple but for a huge family with children and guests. And upstairs in their room, Indira and Feroze had felt lonely and miserable in that house that was filled with memories and peopled by ghosts.

A week earlier Anand Bhawan was roused from its gloomy solitude. The great big house yawned, shook off its months of

lethargy, washed and preened itself, and put on its best appearance to receive a celebrated guest. All the rooms were opened and aired and dusted, flowers appeared in vases, fresh linen was laid out and there was the gleam of China and silver ware in the diningroom. Beside the gallant tricolour that ever fluttered in the breeze appeared the blue and red and white flag of the still United Chinese Republic. Dr Lin Yutang, I had reasons to believe, enjoyed the diplomatic status of a personal representative of President Chiang.

A little siesta after a simple lunch to get rid of the fatigue of the long journey, and we were taken by Indira and Feroze to see the *Sangam*—that was the only thing, besides Anand Bhawan, that Lin Yutang was anxious to see in Allahabad.

Back by evening time, we had early dinner—by candlelight—along with Indira's cousins, the daughters of Mrs Pandit, Chandralekha and Nayantara, preparing to go to America for further studies. And then Nayantara gave a Manipuri dance recital in honour of the guest from China, and the old man was delighted by the colours of the costume and the beauty of the dance movements.

I took leave of them all—the Pandit sisters, Dr Lin, Feroze Gandhi, and Indira, for I had an early morning train to catch.

I had meant to retire early, but sleep eluded me that night. I lay awake, awed by the nearness to the abode of the hero of "My Long Love Affair," and wondering about his daughter—the frail and fragile girl, who had aspired to be a Joan of Arc in her childhood, and who seemed quite capable of competently looking after that great house! It never occurred to me that, after her father, she would be called upon to manage this great country.

29. Children of Hunger

Towards the end of the year 1943 (or it might be the beginning of 1944) I went to Calcutta, the city of horrors.

The horrors began right from the Howrah railway station. Gaunt and skinny refugees lay everywhere—outside the waiting hall from where they had been driven out several times, along the footpaths, on both sides of the great Hooghly Bridge, right in front of the posh hotels and glittering shops of Chowringhee. They were young, old, men, women, children with bloated stomachs, dark-eyed babies dying of rickets. They had no energy even to move about, you couldn't call them beggars for most of them didn't have the energy even to extend their hands for alms. At most they could only piteously cry out "*Maago. . . Phaen do!*" (Please, give us some rice water).

This cry became the dirge of Calcutta, the battle cry of a legion of the lost. Wherever you went, you heard the same feeble whine: *Maago. . . Phaen do. Maago. . . Phaen do! Maago . . . Phaen do!!*

I bought the papers. The *Statesman* had a paragraph about the fresh wave of refugees and the sanitation problems they had created. But it had large advertisements of the five-star hotels which were promising "30-course dinners" and special concessions for defence personnel—British, American and Indian. The *Amrit Bazar Patrika* had more about the refugees but not so much as you could see with your own eyes.

Death stalked the sidewalks. People lay dying in front of the luxury hotels, expensive restaurants, middle class eating houses, in front of the sweet shops and bread shops and milk shops.

Often the glass partition was all that separated the hungry destitutes from the rich display of food. And yet no one had the strength—and the will—to hurl a stone and break this fragile wall of glass.

Everywhere, the stench of death! On roads, in parks, on footpaths, people lay dying—peasants uprooted from the soil who had trekked hundreds of weary miles in the hope of getting a morsel of food, and were now quietly dying. Some did not have the strength to utter that piteous dirge *Phaan do—Phaan do!* And it seemed that with them Bengal, with all its rich heritage of political dynamism, and cultural flowering of art and literature, was dying, too.

I could not bear to stay in Calcutta for more days than was absolutely necessary. I came back to Bombay, tried to tell people from public platform and in private discussions, about the tragedy of Calcutta, but they would not believe me. They made sympathetic sounds as if I was not all there. The sight of a dead body on some pavement, or the experience of a few refugees huddled somewhere on a pavement, had unnerved me and made me delirious. They thought that I was a sentimentalist exaggerating the tragedy to create an effect.

Six months later I went to Calcutta again. I was reassured to see that the destitutes, or at least most of them, had returned to their villages, disillusioned about the city, but richer by the knowledge that they could not depend upon anyone else—neither the government nor the “charitable” city dwellers—that, ultimately, they had to help themselves and one another. And yet enough of them were left behind to remind one of what it was like. Most of these were little urchins who had been separated from their parents, or were deliberately left behind to fend for themselves, or were the products of the rapes and were purposely abandoned by their young mothers. They were seen loitering near the dustbins, mostly near the luxury restaurants. They scrounged in the trash cans for scraps and leftovers of food, or chased the more prosperous-looking American G.I.’s, cadging cigarettes or begging for alms. They begged but they were not servile. There was ferocity in their quick and nimble movements, hatred and anger in their eyes, They were the future Naxalites!

Among the sensitive middle class intelligentsia, also hard hit by the war and the rising prices and the general atmosphere of repression, there was suffering, no doubt—but also an acuter awareness of the issues involved in the epic tragedy through which their people had passed. Also a desire, an urge,

to get at the root of the malady, to analyse and to probe their own psyches and other people's psyches.

I saw this spirit symbolized in the IPTA play *Nav-Anna* (The New Harvest) which was then running in Calcutta and which I, the new general secretary, had specially come to see all the way from Bombay. All the gruesome tragedy was powerfully, realistically, artistically and humanly, if possible beautifully, portrayed on the stage. The rags that the characters wore (and which were later acquired by me for the film) seemed to have the stench of death which no amount of washing in Lysol and Dettol could remove.

All the hopelessness, the helplessness, the tragic inertia, the degrading, dehumanizing process of begging for food, scrounging for scraps, of desperately, selfishly fighting for leftovers like dogs—all that was there, etched in dramatic black and white. But the very fact that it was there—on the stage—that artistes with a sensitive social conscience had portrayed the tragedy of their people, had in it not only emotional catharsis of the Greek tragedy, but the glimmer of hope for the future. It was more than a play; it was the reaffirmation of human values on behalf of the people of Bengal, the people of India. In the play—in its title *The New Harvest* itself—there was the message of hope, that out of the black night of suffering and despair, will emerge the dawn of the new collective awareness that will ensure a better life, a life of dignity, to the people. *The New Harvest* was not only the agricultural harvest of a rice crop, grown by collective effort, but the new harvest of ideas and ideals that must ultimately grow out of the soil of repression and hunger and destitution.

Despite the sombre mood of the play, as I walked the deserted midnight streets of Calcutta, I felt spiritually rejuvenated and creatively inspired. •

In the crucible of my imagination, the dramatic episodes of *Nav-Anna* had merged into two other equally creative masterpieces—another, and shorter, IPTA play *Antim Abhilasha* (His Last Desire) and Krishan Chander's immortal story *Anna-Data* (The Bread Giver), and all three would go into the screenplay of *Dharti ke Lal*, the film I would make about the Bengal famine. I started writing it that very night and had

finished the first sequence by the early hours of the next morning.

But I finished it, some months later, of all places, in Simla!

I had to "cover" the political talks that were then taking place in Simla. But in my agronomist brother-in-law's house, lower down in a *khad* where his potato farm was, I was left alone most of the day locked up in my room, with the characters of my screenplay which were acquiring flesh and blood.

But for some hours every morning I would escape from these endearing and repugnant (but always fascinating) characters, and climb up to the Mall, go to Cecil Hotel, and be with my press colleagues who seemed to think that I was a "lone hunter" who was working his own line of communication for a scoop.

Simla, in 1945, was the last outpost of the British empire. It was the place where *burra* sahebs still dressed for dinner, before having their *chhota* pegs, where the white sahebs and the brown sahebs still went about dropping cards in quaint little "Not at Home" boxes at each other's cottage gates, where eight-course dinners were still served despite war-time rationing, where a man was only a man and not a *pucca* saheb unless he was at least some deputy additional joint secretary. Simla was the place where it was cheaper to hire a rickshaw with four "coolies" to pull it than engage a horse, where only an "excellency" might drive up the Mall in a car. Our Jawaharlal Nehru, now out of jail, rode about on a white horse and created a problem for foot-borne journalists pursuing him for an interview—till my friend Subhan of the *National Herald* also acquired a pony and went cantering after Nehru. Simla was the place where lovely apples, peaches and apricots grew in the orchards but the shops sold tinned fruit imported from Australia; where government servants would come up for promotions and for transfers, unemployed youths for clerical jobs, businessmen were here for war contracts, and politicians—including the national leaders who had been specially released—for political parleys with the viceroy. . . .

It seemed appropriate that the last conference of Indian leaders with the viceroy should be held in this phantom city. It was like a battle in the heart of "enemy" territory. Would

Simla succeed in clouding our national vision by its creeping mists, damping our patriotic ardour by its torrential rain?

One day I buttonholed Maulana Azad, the president of the Congress, for an interview and he said, "*Meray bhai* (My brother, which was his *takya kalam*), can you come early morning tomorrow?"

I said, "Certainly, Maulana. Whenever you say."

He said, "Then I shall expect you at five."

"Five in *the morning*, Maulana?" I asked, aghast.

"Yes, then we won't be disturbed."

I have a mulish *zid* in me. There was no question of getting up so early. So, I never slept that night. I decided to work on my script which was nearing the end. My sister Ak-khan thoughtfully gave me tea at 3-30 a.m. and I set off in that chilly early morning for the three-mile climb to the *kothi* where Maulana was staying.

I arrived there at 4-45 a.m. but I found Maulana already sipping his first cup of tea. I welcomed the cup. I was used to drinking tea without milk—but this was without sugar, too. Maulana told me that he had brewed the tea himself, for it was too early to wake up the servant, so I couldn't even ask for it. But seeing my expression, Maulana imagined my predicament and, taking pity on me, produced a carton of cube sugar. "Take one if you like—but sugar and milk always kill the real taste of tea." The tea (with sugar added) was excellent and, to show my appreciation, I asked for a second cup.

The interview was soon over—Maulana was not very hopeful of the talks succeeding and that was my scoop!—but in the end the Congress president said something that was more of a philosophic significance. "*Meray bhai, Azaadi Simlay mein naheen milegi. Usay kaheen aumdhooondna padega!*" (My brother, freedom will not be found in Simla. We will have to search it somewhere else).

On my way back from the telegraph office for a spot of breakfast in the Cecil, I saw a strange and symbolic phenomenon—Maulana Azad and Jawaharlal Nehru in an open window, affectionately clasped to each other, and a crowd of thousands standing below, roaring with delight.

The two men, both handsome but no longer young, provided a study in contrast. One had dignity, the other had charm; one had the shy, retiring disposition of a scholar, the other had the self-assured (also a little self-conscious) stance of a popular leader used to such demonstrations of love and esteem. The two represented two distinct streams of culture. One was born in Mecca, and had graduated (at the astonishingly young age of fourteen) from the great Muslim seminary of *Al Azhar* in Cairo; the other had been born in holy Prayag, but had received his education at Harrow and Cambridge. One had become a divine, an interpreter of the Holy Quran, the other had drifted towards agnosticism and Marxism.

I think some of that enthusiasm roused by the sight of Nehru and Azad, appearing together in Simla, crept into the scenes of *Dharti ke Lal* where Ramzan is the next door neighbour of Samuddev Pradhan. As played by the late Hameed Butt, the character assures a symbolic significance in the play. Pradhan dies on a city street, but it is old Ramzan who leads the uprooted peasants back to the village—and the promise of a new life.

The People's Theatre enthusiastically welcomed the idea of producing the film on my script. Inevitably, the responsibility of the production of the film *Dharti ke Lal* devolved on me. With my old friend and colleague V.P. Sathe by my side as my associate producer, I had no hesitation in undertaking the task. It was he who had thought of applying for a licence in the special category under which three (then) non-professionals—the IPTA, Uday Shankar Culture Centre and Chetan Anand were allowed to produce their films—*Dharti ke Lal*, *Neecha Nagar* and *Kalpana*.¹ It was with the help of N.M. Joshi, the veteran Labour leader, and a member of Parliament, that we were able to secure the licence.

Actually, *Neecha Nagar* and *Dharti ke Lal* were produced in Bombay, almost on parallel lines, with several artistes in com-

¹Under the war-time restrictions, only licenced producers of some experience and standing were allowed to produce films. The three exceptions were Uday Shankar's Culture Centre (*Kalpana*), Chetan Anand (*Neecha Nagar*) and the Indian People's Theatre's Association (*Dharti ke Lal*).

mon. The direction was also assigned to me but I chose three associate directors to assist me—and they were Shombhu Mitra (a very talented actor and director from the Calcutta IPTA playing the identical role in *Nav-Anna*), the late Balraj Sahni, and P.K. Gupta, a Marathi stage director of repute. We had decided to take only non-professionals in the cast—and had chosen two of our best and most talented artistes to play the two daughters-in-law. They were to be Uzra Mumtaz, whose performance as *Zubaidah* in my play was much appreciated, and Dina Gandhi (now Dina Pathak) who was a dancer in the IPTA's central squad. But both these girls refused the roles for different reasons—Uzra would not part from her first love, the stage, and Dina was reluctant to say goodbye to dancing. So I had to think back of the play *Nav-Anna* and chose Tripti Bhaduri as the younger daughter-in-law. Damyanti Sahni (Balraj's first wife) was to be the elder daughter-in-law. Usha Mehta, a young girl, also came from the Bengal IPTA to act the old wife of Samuddev Pradhan, playing an identical role in *Nav-Anna*. The great Ravi Shankar, then composer for our IPTA's central squad, was to be our music director, and the late Shanti Burdhan the dance director.

We were producing a totally different kind of film in India, and so had to set traditions and precedents. Four hundred rupees per month was fixed as the maximum wage and two hundred rupees was the minimum. No fancy hotels for our artistes. Shombhu, Tripti and Usha—the three from Calcutta—were billeted in out flat, with Mujji as the girl's chaperon and Hindustani tutor. We had a competent make-up man Tahmane to put on beards and wigs, where necessary, but for all the scenes in the city, every day mud mixed with water was sprinkled with a hose on the clothes and faces of all the artistes!

Originally, we planned to do the entire outdoor shooting on Calcutta's pavements, and to stage the massive hunger march with the help of the Kisan Sabhas of the province. We even went to Calcutta with our camera equipment and some of our artistes, hoping to call the others when necessary. The city, however, was still under military occupation, and we had to retreat. We could only surreptitiously take two shots—one showing the hero (the younger son, played by Anwar Mirza)

plying a rickshaw—and a shot of one of Chowringhee's palatial hotels and the dustbins in front of it with some scrounging urchins around it, and with American G.I.'s and British Tommies strolling by. A few minutes later we were hauled up by the military police and, pretending not to have taken any shot yet, we escaped with a warning that no shooting would be permitted anywhere in the city or the province without prior submitting of the script and the plan of the shooting to the civil and military authorities.

Back in Bombay, we were consoled by the offer of the Khandesh Kisan Sabha which was ready to contribute free thousands of its members for the hunger march scenes. So we went by train to Dhulia, and by truck from there, put up in the premises of the village temple, and took all the outdoors of the village and the hunger march scenes. Mujji was with me throughout this trip—and I marvelled at the energy and enthusiasm of this frail little girl, who had to get up at 4 a.m. when all the artistes had to be dressed and made-up by the light of kerosene lanterns. She would give each of them a cup of steaming tea and by 5 a.m. we would start shooting the early morning scenes involving the sunrise. We had to carry our own lunch with us which consisted of dry bread and some dry vegetables. But in the evening when we returned after shooting, refreshed by bath in the river, it was fun sitting in a circle on the ground and being served our main meal of the day—hot *bajra chapaties* smeared with real village ghee, two vegetables, and gur-and-ghee for pudding.

Our cameraman—a veteran of the trade—was the late Jamnadas (Jimmy) Kapadia who taught me everything that should be known by a director about camera and lenses and other equipment. Ramchandra (my present cameraman) was his assistant but this boy was so good and painstaking and imaginative that I had already decided that, after a few years, if I ever got another chance, he would be *the* cameraman for me.

Back to the "indoors" in Bombay. Inevitably, little frictions and misunderstandings arose on the sets between the writer-producer-director and his associate directors. I then knew precious little about film direction—but I had read a few books been and observing the film game for the last ten years, I had written some scripts, good, bad and indifferent. Among the

members of the People's Theatre I could say I was the most qualified to do the job. My associate directors, being essentially good stage artistes, knew even less about film-making than I did. A film director, I felt from the beginning, had to be a kind of dictator, specially when he also had the responsibility of production. When one has to work, with one eye on the calendar, and the other on the clock, sometimes one does get authoritarian since there is no time to have committees and conferences and discussions and confabulations. What has to be done has to be done—immediately, here and now. This my associates, talented and sincere as they were, were not able to comprehend. And so one day they submitted their demands—that every scene must be discussed democratically a night before the shooting and any technical and artistic problems thrashed out. I knew you couldn't make a good picture that way, yet I had to agree. But they were all sporting enough, and once having asserted their rights as associate directors, they let me handle the production more or less as I wanted.

The finance that Sathe had been able to borrow from his boss, meagre as it was, was soon exhausted. We had to borrow more—but the hitch was that no man of money was willing to advance money to a public institution like the Indian People's Theatre Association. So I and Sathe had to pledge everything we had (and didn't have) to raise money to complete the picture. At last the first motion picture made in India by a non-professional¹ cast, director and producer was completed, scored, and censored.

I remember the first show that we gave in the projection theatre of the Shree Sound Studios which had hardly enough space for hundred people, but the chairs were removed and everyone squatted on the floor. I think there were nearly three hundred persons in the hall—members of the IPTA, the artistes and the technicians who had worked for the picture, and also many who had not. When the lights were put off and, after the censor certificate, the legend "People's Theatre Stars the People" was flashed on the screen, there was spontaneous cheering.

¹Three professional and well-known artistes of the screen acted guest roles in the picture to identify themselves with IPTA's efforts—Snehprabha Pradhan, K.N. Singh and David Abraham!

Everyone felt that they were witnessing a special and memorable occasion. Hitherto men of money had made pictures but at last men and women of conviction and commitment—with no money of their own—had somehow made a motion picture, to record one of the great tragedies of their times. I and Sathe stood throughout that suffocating show—too many people in a non-airconditioned hall—and when the film ended, we were disappointed and dismayed to find that there was no cheering, no applause. Everyone got up in silence but, as the lights came on, and as they walked past, I could see that everyone had tears in his or her eyes. They were too moved for words.

We had ended the film on a note of hope—the returned villagers were celebrating the *New Harvest*, dancing round the pile of grain—but Radha and Ramoo were going away from the village. They were not able to face their families—and the words of Radha, as lisped by Tripti Mitra, had a haunting quality. “It is better for us to go away—so that, so long as they live, they will not forget our story.”

Simla was again the venue of the conference of the India’s political leaders, this time not only with the viceroy but with the three-member Cabinet mission. Everyone was there—from the Congress side Maulana Azad, Nehru, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Sardar Patel; Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan, Ismail Khan, Sardar Abdul Rab Nishtar from the Muslim League; Pethick Lawrence, A.V. Alexander and, of course, Sir Stafford Cripps from the British side, with Lord Wavell, presiding over the deliberately (or dutifully) contentious conference. I wanted to be there, for the NEWS was there, and Sathe told me why shouldn’t we carry with us the tins of our *Dharti ke Lal*, if possible to show it to the leaders present? The international press would also be there, and we could have a sort of world premiere in one of Simla’s few cinemas.

Before the conference failed and dispersed from the cool heights of Simla to the scorching heat of New Delhi, we managed to hold our show of *Dharti ke Lal* in Simla’s Gaiety Theatre. The leaders were in conference with the viceroy and the Cabinet mission, but all the journalists came, as also several distinguished Congressmen and Congresswomen including

Mrs Sarojini Naidu whom I had once described in one of my "Last Pages" as "more fascinating to talk to than a glamour girl of twenty."

At the end of the screening, we were overwhelmed by the unqualified praise of the film which the leaders as well as the journalists poured out. Old Mrs Naidu, affectionate and irrepresible as ever, with tears streaming down her face, embarrassed me by embracing and kissing me right there. Later some of them wrote to us, too. Norman Cliff, foreign editor of the *News Chronicle*, said that "a breath of fresh creative promise had stirred the cinema screen in India," Archic Steele regarded it "as timely and authentic" and hoped it will be possible to "show it in the United States so that Americans may realize that India is more than just a country of bejewelled Maharajas, old Poona Boys and Tiger Hunts." George Jones of the *New York Times* said that it "interested him greatly" and that "it had several powerful sequences—including the (hunger) march to Calcutta—which reminded me of Eisenstein at his best." But the supreme compliment came from Palme Dutt who said that the problem of India would be solved if the twelve old men sitting there in the Viceregal Lodge had only come here to see this film and been confronted with the reality of India.

For four years after that I was not able to produce a film of my own. But, meanwhile, prints of *Dharti ke Lal* found their way to the film libraries of London, Paris and New York. From Moscow a 16 mm print of the film was flown in early 1948 to embattled Yenan where the Eighth Route Army was fighting against Chiang's forces in the civil war.

There was a later postscript in Paris where, on returning from Moscow after my first trip in 1954, I went to visit Cinematheque Francais, the famous film library of Paris. There I met the old, fat lady, Marie Meerson, who knew everything about everyone in films anywhere in the world. In the course of our talk, she said she had always wanted to meet the maker of a certain Indian film which had come to the Cinematheque without any literature accompanying it.

"Can you describe it—or tell part of the story?"

What she described was the synopsis of *Dharti ke Lal*.

B.D. Garga, my friend, who was accompanying me, said the maker of that film was sitting there right in front of her.

The impulsive Gallic lady thereupon stood up, hugged me and planted a big, wet kiss on my cheek—which at once embarrassed and delighted me!

30. Who Killed India?

Once upon a time there was a man who built a house in a forest, even as his brother had built a house in another part of the same forest.

To make the place secure, he built a high wall around it. To ward off robbers and thieves he kept a squad of dogs, and bought a rifle.

One day he had a feeling that there was a robber in the forest.

He was afraid the robber would surprise him with a sudden attack. So he loaded his gun, and went out to search for the miscreant.

He felt the intruder rustling in the grass. He saw footprints and went after them.

He thought he saw him at last—or at least his substantial shadow.

So he fired at the intruder.

There were two shots fired. Two people lay dead.

The brothers, each of them suspecting a marauder, had killed each other.

I don't know why, whenever I hear of a communal riot, or of Indo-Pak tension, or an Israeli-Arab conflict, this story comes to my mind.

Fear leads to hatred—hatred leads to violence of language and of temper—violence leads to mutual slaughter of the two brothers!

Towards the end of 1945, once again Bombay was gripped by a series of what are called communal riots which continued upto August 1947. The city was divided between “Hindu Bombay” and “Muslim Bombay,” with no communication between the two. Fear gripped not only the minority but even the majority. Trams passing through Bhendi Bazar would empty at Crawford

Market at the southern end, and at Byculla Bridge at the northern end. No Muslim would venture into Girgaum or Kalbadevi, Lal Bagh or Parel or Dadar. But I, who regarded myself as neither a Muslim nor a Hindu, but an Indian, made a point of visiting both sides. The poor Poorbi *doodh-bhayyas* and the Muslim bread sellers, were among the people who had to crisscross the unseen lines for their living and, sometimes, had to pay with their lives.

I have personally seen some of these killings—their gory details, haunted my dreams for years. I had experienced the sense of shame and helplessness at being a witness to cold-blooded murder of innocents and yet been able to do nothing about it.

Once, from the balcony of my friend Sathe's office in front of Harkissandas Hospital, I saw a bizarre killing which inspired (or provoked) one of my stories *Main Kaun Hoon?* It was a "Hindu" area, and a *goonda* spied a man in *kurta* and pajama walking by the side of the road. He followed him, and taking him to be a Muslim, stabbed him in the back. The knife pierced some vital spot and the man lay dead. The *goonda* wiped the blood on the knife on the clothes of the victim, and as he was doing it, a doubt seemed to cross his mind. So he tugged at the pajama cord, opened it, saw that the man was not circumcised, and then clasping his knife, he uttered two words that would haunt me for years. He said, "*Mishtake hogaya.*"

And I felt like crying out from the balcony, "Yes, you are right. You have made a horrible mistake—and the mistake was that you killed your own brother—not because he was an uncircumcised Hindu, but because he was a man, someone's son, someone's husband, someone's brother, your own brother."

For several months a death wish obsessed me—I would take unnecessary risks, I would don my khadi clothes, and put on a Gandhi cap, and take a tram through Mohamed Ali Road and Bhendi Bazar, stopping at bookshops near the J.J. Hospital, hoping to be mistaken for a Hindu—and killed or, at least, stabbed. In my over-heated imagination I wanted that earlier "*mishtake*" to be equalized.

I was running repeated risks for, during curfew hours, with my Press pass, I would detrain at Dadar station and, since no buses were running then, I would walk across the roads to

Shivaji Park sea-front where my flat was. My wife knew the risk I was running, but it was typical of her that she never frightened me or discouraged me. A time came when the Shivaji Park area was taken over by the RSS, every day the saffron flag would be put up, and their volunteers would be drilled and made to listen to anti-Muslim harangues. One by one, the dozen or so Muslims residing in that area migrated to "safer" localities in the city—and ultimately I and my wife and my servant were the only three Muslims left in Shivaji Park.

After *Dharti ke Lal*, I had been to Lahore to make a film, but the film could not be properly finished due to the riots, and I had to come back without completing it. (It was later patched up in Bombay, and also released somewhere or the other, but I never got to see it). But I had seen enough of the riot-ridden Punjab. In Rawalpindi the Muslims who were in an overwhelming majority, were clearly the aggressors, though there were humanist exceptions where Muslims did save the families of their Hindu and Sikh friends and neighbours. In Lahore, where both sides were about equally balanced, it was not a riot but a civil war which was being fought with burning and looting and killing. In Amritsar, and other places in the East Punjab, it was the obverse of Rawalpindi, and Muslims were the victims of violence.

I was in Amritsar when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru toured the place, and I saw with my own eyes a whole bazar burnt, including several bookshops, and burnt-out copies of the Vedas, the Gita, the Holy Quran and the Granth Saheb lying side by side, among the cinders.

On 3 June 1947, I and Sathe were at the house of the Maharashtrian actor-director-producer the late Master Wina-yak, discussing a film project which was to be called, significantly enough, *Naya Admi* (The New Man) when the radio announced that in a few minutes the speeches of Lord Louis Mountbatten, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Mr M.A. Jinnah and Sardar Baldev Singh would be broadcast. Literally millions all over the yet united India, sat glued to their or their neighbours' radiosets, for the fate of India was to be decided that day. From Peshawar to Travancore, from Karachi to Shillong, India became an enormous collective ear, waiting for the broadcasts breathlessly, helplessly, hoplessly. Never before in the history

of the world would the destiny of so many depend upon the words that would fall from the mouths of so few.

Pakistan and partition had been in the air for too long for any one to be surprised by the content of these speeches. The "special correspondents" and their "sources close to Whitehall" had for once been quite correct in their forecasts. When we sat down to listen in we knew exactly what was coming. And yet when it came, one could hardly believe one's ears. And, as one after another, the four speakers of the evening reiterated their acceptance of the fact of partition, the thought kept hammering at one's mind: can these four people, or even greater ones than they, conjure away the oneness of India and divide it into two separate countries—Pakistan (truncated) and Hindustan (non-*akhand*)?

The tones of the speeches were significant—you might even say symbolic.

Lord Louis Mountbatten was confident, complacent, patronizing. He knew he had achieved a rare miracle, and he expected compliments and congratulations, which were soon forthcoming from the three who followed him—a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Sikh! Yes, Mountbatten had reduced the redoubtable secularist, Jawaharlal Nehru, to a mere Hindu!

Jawaharlal Nehru was choked with emotion, rhetorical rather than (as was usual with him) conversational, indulging in the professional writer's weakness to cloak inconvenient facts with a pretty turn of phrase. He talked of Indians "being on the march," of "the goal," and "the journey's end"; of "months of sore trial, difficulty, anxiety and, sometimes, even heart-breaks" and of his abiding faith "in the great destiny of India which takes shape, even though with travail and suffering"; he commended "the vital change affecting the future of India." And he concluded with the salutation that would sound hollow at least on that day: *Jai Hind!*

If Jawaharlal Nehru had still to acquire a conversational, informal, radio manner, Mr Jinnah was just a voice before the microphone. But his sense of triumph and elation came through, even if (like all new broadcasters) he messed up his words now and then.

Sardar Baldev Singh had nothing much to say, and he said it badly. He was included, I suppose, to placate the valiant

Sikhs and to reassure the *jawans* of the army, navy and air force.

It would have been all so amusing, even funny, if it were not for the tragic implications of what was said. Jawaharlal Nehru's words might well have been the theme song of the moment—"With no joy in my heart!" There was no joy even in the hearts of his listeners. I saw tears in the eyes of the people listening in along with me. Death is final, inevitable, yet every time someone dear to us passes away, human sentiment protests, revolts, bursts out in a flood of tears. How does one mourn the death of a country, one's country?

Who killed India? I asked in my next "Last Page". Yes, indeed, who did?

Was it the fell work of an insane individual, a stab in the back as in a communal riot; or the diabolical conspiracy of a gang? Was it a case of slow poisoning? Or, as it might be, was it a more diabolical, more cunning master plan, in which the victim himself was hypnotically induced to commit suicide. . . .

India was killed by Britain. The first blow was struck when the British (after ignoring and neglecting them for half a century after the events of 1857) instigated and encouraged the Muslims to demand separate electorates and then conceded it. That was the first step towards Pakistan, however copious tears Lord Mountbatten may now shed over the mortal remains of United India.

India was killed by the British and their 'Divide and Rule' policy. But not by the British alone. India was killed by fanatical Muslim Leaguers who played upon the community's apprehensions and fears to produce in them a peculiar psychosis which was a dangerous combination of inferiority complex, aggressive jingoism, religious fanaticism, and fascistic *Herrenvolk* legends.

India was killed by the fanatical Hindus, the Hindu fascists and Hindu imperialists, the dreamers of a Hindu empire, the crusaders of Hindu Sangathan, who provided the ideological fuel for the fire of Hindu communalism and fanaticism.

India was killed by the Hindu communalists, the believers and supporters of Hindu exclusiveness. . . . who yet mas-

queraded as Nationalists and Congressmen, who prevented the National Congressmen and the National movement from becoming a fully representative, completely non-communal front of all Indian patriots.

India was killed by the Communist Party of India which (during the days of its 'People's War' and 'pro-Pakistan' policies) provided the Muslim separatists with an ideological basis for the irrational and anti-national demand for Pakistan. (Phrases like 'homeland,' 'nationalities,' 'self-determination' etc. were all ammunition supplied by the Communists to the legions of Pakistan.)

India was killed, and stabbed in the heart, by every Hindu who killed a Muslim, by every Muslim who killed a Hindu, by every Hindu or Muslim who committed or abetted, or connived at, arson and rape and murder during the recent (and earlier) communal riots.

That an imperialist power planned the dismemberment of our country in the very hour of our freedom is not surprising. The wonder, and the tragedy is that India should have been killed by the children of India. . . .

Gandiji was the only leader of note who refused to bless the concept of Pakistan with his approval. In any case he was busy in Noakhali and Bihar, quenching the fires of intercommunal hatred and violence.

But why did Jawaharlal the secularist, Maulana Azad the apostle of unity, and Sardar Patel the nationalist, agree to this partition?

According to Durga Das, the author of *India from Curzon to Nehru and After*, they were old men who "were too weary to carry on the struggle any further and were, in their heart of hearts, anxious to grasp power and enjoy its fruits without further delay."¹

Another theory which I have heard advanced by a knowledgeable person is that Nehru, when questioned about partition, said, "It is either that—or back to jail!"

I am inclined to doubt the veracity of this quotation from

¹Durga Das, *India from Curzon to Nehru and After*, Collins, London, p. 255.

Nehru. This is not his language. It is possible that he did say something which might be misunderstood or misinterpreted as his weariness of jail-going. He was tired not so much of jail-going—as much as of the unyielding stone wall of the Muslim League which was not willing to agree to unity on any terms. And the British, the clever monkeys, were unwilling to part with power without nibbling at freedom which was divided between the two hostile camps—or cats—of the Hindus and the Muslims. Moreover Nehru, as the head of the interim government, had experience of heading a ministry of the Congress and the Muslim League and knew the combination was unworkable and would always lead to more and more trouble.

But why did Mr M.A. Jinnah agree to a truncated Pakistan—yielding Hindu-majority districts of Bengal and the Punjab to India? Here the testimony of an ex-officer of the CBI seems plausible—Mr Jinnah had just come to know of the cancer from which he was suffering. He had not long to live and couldn't postpone the realization of his cherished dream of carving Pakistan out of India. For him it was either this or a period of struggle, agitation and, perhaps, armed conflict for which he was not in a physically fit enough condition.

An interlude of sanity and unity—the wedding of my friend V.P. Sathe and Leela Purandekar in Poona. Quite a few of us made the night trip to Poona, leaving Bombay after midnight and arriving early next morning in Poona. Quite a few Muslim friends were present—Dilip Kumar (Yusuf Khan), the film star, Najmul Hasan Naqvi and Mohd. Hassan, both film directors, who were eventually to reach Pakistan, and my old friend Manmohan Sabir, and I and my wife, of course!

In a small way, this wedding—and the casual manner in which Sathe and his father—did away with the communal orthodoxy undid the partition for me, and helped to repair the mood of depression that had settled over my soul.

Mountbatten's "Calendar of Partition" was fluttering away, as the two sides bargained about the division of assets. So many days before 15 August, when independence would come to India and a day earlier, to Pakistan. Meanwhile the riots ceased in the two would-be new countries—their place was taken by massacres and murders on a mass scale, of the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan; of Muslims in India.

My family was in Panipat, but there were also parts of my

family in Delhi—my cousin and his wife—i.e., my sister—and their children in a flat on Babar Road; my cousin-sister and brother-in-law were in the Jamia Millia in Okhla. One day the RSS boys came to the Babar Road locality in trucks to carry away the Muslim property. A minute earlier a kindly Sikh gentleman hid my cousin and his family in the interior of his house, and when the looting began, the *sardar's* children joined in the process, and brought home much of the household articles which, they claimed as their neighbourly right! Asked as to where the “Musallas” had gone, they had no compunction about the virtuous lie they told—that they had run away to a refugee camp. If somehow the looters had come to know that they were there, not only their lives were in danger but also the life of the old *sardarji* who was standing guard over them holding a drawn sword in his hand. (It was this incident which inspired the story of *Sardarji* many months later!)

My young friend Manmohan whose family was somewhere in Shaikhupura was staying with me in Shivaji Park, and through him I could well imagine the plight of the Hindus and Sikhs who were trapped in Lahore, Peshawar, Rawalpindi and Lyalpur in what was to become Pakistan. Sometimes he would have nightmares in his sleep, and give out blood-curdling yells at night. Another friend, a shaved Sikh, Harbans Singh, living alone in the Shivaji Park area, and waiting for the safe arrival of his parents from Rawalpindi, would come every night to my place and he and Manmohan would sleep in the drawingroom, while I and my wife slept in the bedroom. To these two friends I owe my safety during those murderous days.

One day I was returning home at night from the office, and passing through the curfew-bound roads. The situation on that day was very tense. Several murders had been reported from different parts of the city. The Hindu and Muslim *goondas* used to keep the score even—as in the mischievously-devised cricket pentangulars, when there was the crucial match between the Hindus and Muslims. If five Hindus were killed and against that six Muslims were killed it was a point of honour (or dishonour) for the Muslim *goondas* to equalize the score. There was no particular issue in Bombay—it would remain in India, in any case. Killing Hindus or killing Muslims was a sport of the

ungallant gladiators.

As I was walking home, thinking of the unfortunate situation and the gory developments of the day, I heard the sound of footsteps behind me. Who was he? I thought as the steps came nearer. In Shivaji Park, at that time it could only be a Hindu? But was it a peaceable householder returning home like me? Suppose it was not, suppose it was a *goonda*? There was not a soul anywhere in sight. Only two men walking, one after another. Death never seemed so near as on that day at that time. Should I run for my life? But he might overtake me. So I slowed down so that he might overtake me and pass on in front of me. Suppose he stabbed me in the back—I had a twitching sensation in my spine. I died and lived several times during those seconds, while the footsteps also slowed down. That man was not going to pass me and go ahead. Was he also afraid of me? Or was he taking out his dagger to slash me in the back? But he continued to walk slowly just a few paces behind me. At last the suspense was too much to bear. Let the worst happen! So I stopped and took a step back. He was afraid of me. I was afraid of him. The two brothers stalking each other in the forest that was curfew-bound Bombay.

But in the light from a street lamp, he recognized me and felt relieved.

“Abbas *bhai*,” said the man.

I also recognized him as a neighbour of mine.

“Bhaskar Rao, where are you going?”

“I’m going to attend the first meeting of the *Swaraksha Dal* that we are forming for the defence of Shivaji Park. Are you coming?”

I was not abreast of local politics and did not know that a *Swaraksha Dal* was being formed in Shivaji Park. So I said, “Yes, let’s go.”

There were about fifty or sixty residents of Shivaji Park, gathered in one of the sports clubs in the park. I sat inconspicuously in the background, but several people recognized me and urged me to come forward. Somebody was voted to the chair and the meeting began. The first item was the election of an executive committee. I was surprised to hear the first name proposed—it was my own name. Bhaskar—the man who,

a few minutes earlier, I was suspecting, was going to stab me—proposed my name. Much to my surprise, I, a Muslim, was unanimously elected. The meeting dispersed soon after the election of the executive which would meet the next day in the flat of Seth X Chand.

I took leave from the office next day to be able to attend the meeting of the executive of the *Swaraksha Dal*. Still, when I arrived, a heated argument had already begun. One of the members was outlining the strategy.

Twelve men had to be appointed to guard against a sudden attack from the Mahim side. The secretary had proposed to recruit twelve ex-INA men. The proposal had received universal and enthusiastic support, as it was said it was our patriotic duty to provide succour to the unemployed INA personnel—till the names of the twelve men were read out.

Then it was found that a "Pakistani fifth columnist" had smuggled himself in the group. One of the twelve had a Muslim name—some Qureishi or Farooqi or Usmani!

Then all hell broke loose.

"How can we entrust the defence of our locality to a Muslim?"

"No. No. You tell the INA people this man is not acceptable."

"But," the secretary interjected, "INA people will supply their men only if we will keep the whole lot. There are five Hindus, six Sikhs and only one Muslim."

"*Aray, ek machhli saray talab ko ganda karay hai*," one fat man said.

Then a lean man, with hungry looks, added, "How can we entrust the safety of our sisters, our daughters and our wives, to a Muslim?"

He said it, and then looked at me. "*Abbas Bhai ki baat aur hi hai*," he added apologetically.

I came away from the meeting on some excuse. I walked in a rage. No wonder they were asking for Pakistan! No wonder they had got their Pakistan! Who killed India? If the Muslim communalists were guilty, their accomplices were also such Hindus? So Muslims had their Pakistan, and Hindus had their Bharat. Where were the Indians like me to go? There was no Indian then! Even Jawaharlal Nehru had become a Hindu!

Even Maulana Azad will have to go to Pakistan!

That day was the nearest I came to abandoning India. That day I had to go somewhere—away from Bombay. I couldn't go to Pakistan—it was betrayal of one's country, of one's principles of secularism. So I went *back* one thousand and five hundred years—to Ajanta! I and my wife and my friend Sathe. We took a train to Aurangabad, reserving the seats in our true names—Mr and Mrs Abbas and V.P. Sathe!

For three days we wandered over the caves of Ajanta and Ellora, marvelling at the art of Buddhist painting and mediaeval sculpture. Ellora, being carved out of stone, was much better preserved. There were Hindu gods and goddesses carved out of the same rock, and the serene countenance of the Buddha and his apostles, and the Buddhist legends.

I was astonished to learn that several generations of artists had worked on the sculptures of each cave, which had taken between two hundred and fifty to four hundred years to complete. And none of them had carved their names or even their initials. To work was its own reward. To work devotedly, dedicatedly, anonymously! I could even hear the hammers hitting the chisels, slicing the rock in the unfinished cave. Then I knew what the caves of Ellora were saying to me.

I went to Aurangabad railway station to take the train back to Bombay. Both I and my wife felt spiritually renewed and rejuvenated.

So I came back to Bombay and, on the very day of my arrival, went to the meeting of the *Swaraksha Dal*.

"After you left that day," one of my colleagues informed me, "we had a big debate about the INA personnel and we persuaded the two or three nervous and non-secular types that INA people were above communal considerations, and whether he was a Hindu, a Sikh or a Muslim—he was, as a member of the INA, above all else, an Indian! So we have appointed the INA people to guard Shivaji Park."

There were tears of happiness in my eyes, I felt choked with emotion.

At the meeting that day I found all the members agitated about the prospects of an attack from the Muslims of Mahim.

"We will all have to be on our guard at night with *lathis*,

and whistles and torches. They might not come by the road which is likely to be patrolled by the police, but they are likely to march along the sea-front."

That night, with a ridiculous *lathi* in my hand I joined the other members of the *Swaraksha Dal* in patrolling the sea-front. It was a moonlit night and there was no possibility of an attack. Moreover, I knew some of the people in Mahim, and I knew they must be as scared of an attack on them from Shivaji Park Hindus as we were afraid of them.

During the patrolling, I broke away from my squad and went walking down the beach towards Mahim. There, I could see silhouetted figures with *lathis*, patrolling. My heart started beating wildly. I had reassured all about the unlikelihood of an attack from Mahim side. And here I was seeing them coming with *lathis*—or, who knows, spears? I turned back to see my people but they were already lost in the shadows.

Meanwhile, I was apprehended by the shadows from Mahim.

"*Kaun hai?*" one of them shouted, and I could detect a note of fear mixed with alarm and apprehension.

I said I was Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, who had come to talk to the people of Mahim.

"What do you want to talk about" said one of them.

I replied, "We hear that you are going to launch an attack on us in Shivaji Park? Is it true?"

"On the contrary," he replied, "we hear the Hindus of Shivaji Park are going to attack us, the Muslims of Mahim. We saw some *lathi*-armed Hindus coming this side to launch a sneaky attack on us in the night. So we also took our *lathis* and came to defend ourselves! You have armed INA people to lead the attack."

"I am not a Hindu but a Muslim—there is also a Muslim among the INA people. So you have two guarantees that the people of Shivaji Park will not launch an unprovoked attack on the people of Mahim."

Soon a short, slim caricature of a man came forward, looking like Sancho Panza with a *lathi* twice as high as himself.

"Abbas Saheb."

"Khan Saheb."

That was the late Rashid Khan, the pocket-sized actor of the radio, the IPTA's *Dharti ke Lal*, and then of the screen.

He embraced me which was difficult because of our two *lathis* coming in the way.

So I threw my *lathi* on the ground.

He did the same.

"What are you doing with that *lathi*?" I asked him at last.

"The same as you are doing, Abbas Saheb. Remember the dialogue I spoke in *Dharti ke Lal*?"

I remembered it very well. After all I had written it. There, as a teacher who has gone mad after the death of his wife, the wild-haired man, hugging a street lamp, makes the final comment on the human condition. So I intoned the dialogue: "*Suna hai insaan pehlay bunder tha! Ab taraqqi karte karte kutta ho gaya hai—kutta*"!

"Yes, you are right. I don't know why but I remembered that dialogue today as with *lathis* in our hands, we were patrolling the beach and hiding in the shadows, expecting an attack from the Shivaji Park side."

I made an appointment with him and others for the morrow at noon at the police check post on Ghodbunder Road. I would bring half a dozen men from Shivaji Park and they should do the same.

Next day the twelve of us—six from each side—met at the police check post which was a barrier between Mahim and Shivaji Park. The Hindus were discouraged to cross over into Mahim, and the Muslims were afraid to enter the Shivaji Park area.

We talked of the rumours that each side feared an attack from the other, and now that we were there face to face, laughed at it. That seemed to ease the situation and soon there were more and more people—mostly shopkeepers who got up from their shops—came to the check post to look at Muslims (or Hindus) from across the barricade. Enquiries were made of the market prices prevailing on either side. Old acquaintances greeted each other and enquiries were made about each other's health. Even the police were relaxed now and took part in the conversation. At last someone—I forgot from which side, or did the suggestion came simultaneously from both sides?—suggested that the police lift the barrier. The police officer looked from one party to the other, then with one movement

of his hand, the barrier went up, and now the amazing thing happened—Hindu and Muslim who were supposed to be thirsting for each other's blood, were embracing each other, laughing and some were weeping, too!

This experiment in restoring normalcy and cordiality between the two communities inspired the Indian People's Theatre Association and the Progressive Writers' Association to come together and mobilize all the progressive cultural associations and organizations of Marathi and Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu writers, artistes, film workers, artistes of the Prithvi Theatre and various theatre groups in Bombay. I remember that in all fifty-two associations were mobilized to take out a unity procession that would parade from Bori Bunder to Bandra, passing through the exclusively Hindu areas and Muslim areas, thus removing the unseen barriers that were dividing Bombay into little bits of "Hindu Bombay" and "Muslim Bombay." The procession was a great success. We had different trucks—one with Prithviraj Kapoor, the doyen of film heroes, and his young teenaged sons—Raj Kapoor and Shammi Kapoor—beating the big drum. The IPTA truck had Balraj Sahni and Prem Dhawan and Chetan Anand and Dev Anand. The Urdu Progressive writers were represented by Sajjad Zaheer, Ali Sardar Jafri, Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi and Majrooh Sultanpuri.

There were my friends V.P. Sathe and Inder Raj Anand and Manmohan Sabir. There were Marathi writers and artistes, including the veteran Mama Warerkar, and the younger Anant Kanekar. There were Gujarati writers and artistes including Gulabdas Broker, Jithubhai Mehta, and Ojha.

This massive caravan moved slowly through the streets, and a whole concourse of people marched with it. There were speeches and songs, and poems were recited and slogans were raised. The denizens of the ivory tower and the artistic dovecotes had descended to the earth, and the people were amazed and happy.

When we reached the J.J. Hospital corner of Bhendi Bazar, a young Muslim Leaguer taunted me from the side-lines: "*Kyon, Abbas Saheb, aaj bohat din ke baad nazar aae ho?*"

I shot back through the loudspeaker, "*Par aaj akela naheen aaya hoon. Ek lashkar leke aaya hoon!*" (But today I haven't come alone. I have come at the head of an army.)

Bombay—15 August 1947.

As I woke up early in the morning, my first worry was whether it would rain on that memorable, historic day.

The morning papers were full of last night's transfer-of-power ceremony in New Delhi. Jawaharlal Nehru's "tryst of destiny" speech had been made, and duly reported, and to read it even in cold print was an exciting experience.

Long years ago, he had said, we made a tryst with destiny, and the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to new life and freedom it means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity. The ambition of the greatest man of our generation has been to wipe away every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us, but as long as there are tears and suffering, so long as our work will not be over.

I did not know then that as he was uttering these stirring words he carried in his *sherwani* pocket the telegrams from the Punjab, from UP, from Bihar and Bengal about the atrocities that continued to be committed against Hindus and Sikhs, and against Muslims.

As I dressed in khaddar pant and bush shirt, I knew it was for the last time. I was wearing khaddar till that day.

Now, I said, India is free and khaddar would become identified with the Establishment. All sorts of people, for all sorts of reasons—not all honourable—would now don what till then was the livery of the army of freedom.

Having read the papers, and after a perfunctory breakfast (during which I had little time to worry about the riots and the transfer of population which meant that my family was trapped in Panipat; twenty-five thousand Muslims from this town of thirty thousand men were under orders to be forcibly evicted and sent to Pakistan, while my family was anxious to come over to Bombay!), I took a tram to Gowalia Tank, where the "Quit India" session of the Congress was held in 1942, and from where the mammoth procession today was due to start which would end in the afternoon at Flora Fountain.

On that day, quiet reflection and introspection was not

possible. There was too much excitement. All Bombay (and his wife and son and daughter) was at Gowalia Tank *maidan* and at last the procession started. There must have been a million people in the three-mile long procession. I never saw the whole of it. I was not an island. I was a drop in the ocean, and I wondered if a drop can see the ocean as a whole.

I was one of a million performers in the greatest drama of our century, and was I proud of this moment? Elsewhere inter-communal killings were going on, but I did not know it, I did not want to know it. For the time being, the ugly and grisly news had been pushed out of the front pages which were exclusively devoted to news of the freedom celebrations. What if a few hundred thousand people were killed in the two new dominions, so long as four hundred million—we were only that many then—were free at last. Free. Free! It didn't strike us that along with the few hundred thousand people, the values of humanity, compassion, unity and freedom were also being killed or grievously injured.

I was in the group of writers and artistes in that procession. Everyone was singing, and everyone was dancing to the rhythm of the drums that were being played by a number of artistes, including a young film star. And I, too, danced on the streets—believe it or not—with some dancers of international reputation!

On the way, there was a slight drizzle—then it was clear—and then there were more showers. But by the time it all ended we were soaked more in our own perspiration than in the rainwater.

The slogan-shouting, the speeches, the songs, the dances were over—for the time being at least. A great depression seemed to fall over the million dispersing participants in the freedom pageant. For now they were not knit by the unifying fact of freedom. Now they were mere individuals worrying about how to reach home.

It was about 8 p.m. when I reached my little flat—that was still in Shivaji Park—and found a telegram waiting for me. It had been sent three days ago from Panipat. It read: "Situation Critical. Arrange Our Safe Journey To Bombay!"

31. My Long Love Affair—3

Despite his stirring “tryst with destiny” speech, I was not happy with Jawaharlal Nehru.

The fact of partition—and, more so, his acceptance of it—rankled in my throat. He had made too many compromises. Was dominion status what our martyrs like Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt and Jatin Das had died for? Mountbatten was to be our first governor-general. Why? Pakistan had at least chosen Jinnah. Did our Jawaharlal have to demonstrate his friendship with the Mountbattens? None seemed to protest, or to show him the right path, to remind him of his own speeches, of his promises and pledges to the people—not Sardar Patel, not Maulana Azad, not Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant! They all seemed in (what appeared to be) indecent haste to share the fruits of office and power!

Or (another disturbing thought) had we the people betrayed our leader—by indulging in mass massacres which besmirched the fact of freedom with blots—or, rather, pools—of blood? It seemed that, out of all the millions of India, only two decent human beings had remained. Gandhiji was celebrating the advent of freedom by tramping the villages of Noakhali and Bihar to take the message of peace to the Muslims and the Hindus. For him at least humanity came first—freedom came afterwards. And Jawaharlal was daily risking his own life to restore peace in Delhi. Had he not snatched the naked sword from the hands of a would-be murderer of Muslims? He spent days and nights by driving in a jeep, with but a single guard-driver sitting beside him, going where the trouble was. Did he not rush to the Jamia Millia at Okhla when he heard that the great store house of Urdu books—which significantly and symbolically included Urdu translations of Gandhiji’s *Experiments with Truth* and his own *Autobiography*—had been reduced to cinders? Was it not said of his friend Zakir Husain, when

Jawaharlal Nehru asked him to estimate the loss, saying, "We have been able to get a lakh worth of books today?" Perplexed and puzzled by Zakir Saheb's peculiar statement Nehru exploded, "I heard you have lost books worth lakhs in this fire!"

"True!" the great-hearted doctor of philosophy replied, "But when I heard of the fire I had written off all the books worth five lakhs. If books worth a lakh have been saved, that is a nett gain for us. It's a way of looking at things—you can be a pessimist or an optimist. I prefer to look at the bright side of things."

At last, despite the tension and the strain, the shame and the anger that he felt, Nehru relaxed and smiled and at last chuckled.

To this bad-good man, whom I had loved and hated simultaneously, in those days of horror, I turned in my hour of need when the lives and the honour of my own family were involved. I sent him a long wire, telling him about the plight of the Muslims of Panipat, the majority of whom wanted to live in India but they were being forced to evacuate to Pakistan because of the rising pressure of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan. I told him that my family had decided to come to Bombay, where I would be available to provide for them, and that at least they should be helped to come to some safe place in Delhi from where I would make arrangements to fly them to Bombay. I sent the telegram, and then waited. That was what millions of people were doing on both sides of the Radcliffe Line.

Meanwhile, my friend Manmohan, after months of silence and suspense, received a letter which was addressed to him in the handwriting of his father. His hands were trembling, there were tears in his eyes, and he could not bring himself to open the letter. He did not know what message it had to communicate—his father might be writing to give him the news of his mother's and sisters' death while coming from Pakistan to India. At last I opened the letter and gave him the good news that both his parents and sisters had been saved by their Muslim neighbours, and helped to cross over into India. Now they were living in a refugee camp.

At last after waiting for a week I got a letter from my mother that they had safely arrived in Delhi and were staying in the upper floor room of *Bara Dawakhana*—a Unani pharmacy my father had founded while he lived—in Lal Kuan. They had many adventures (both pleasant and unpleasant) but, thanks to the kind intervention of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, they had arrived safely in Delhi and were waiting for me to arrange for their air journey to Bombay as, they had heard, trains were still unsafe.

The “adventures” to which my mother referred in her letter were harrowing enough to ladies who had led a sheltered life behind the purdah. Pieced together from accounts told by her and my sisters later, this is their story.

No one in Panipat understood the true nature and implications of Pakistan. The few white-collared employees in the government service had opted for Pakistan in the hope of getting quick promotions in the Islamic state, but they never bargained for setting up permanent homes in the far-off and unfamiliar cities of Pakistan—like Karachi, Lahore, Montgomery (where the bulk of the Panipatis were settled in the homes of Hindus and Sikhs who had migrated to India and been settled, of all places, in Panipat!). Why couldn't the Muslims of Panipat stay on in Panipat and the Hindus of Montgomery stay on in Montgomery?

Two cousins of mine had a large, modern-style house—a *kothi*—with extensive gardens and orchards near the Panipat railway station. They received very attractive and lucrative offers from the local Lalas for the house and garden in June and July but they wouldn't part with it. It was built by their father, and they were sentimentally attached to it.

“But, Khwaja Saheb,” the would-be purchasers argued, “after all you are going to Pakistan. Why not sell your property while the going is good?”

“*Abay, pagal huwa hai?*” (Idiot, are you mad?) My cousin remonstrated with the would-be purchaser, “*Aur jab naukri chhore kay, pension lay kay aaengay, to hum kahan rahengay?*” (And where shall we stay when we return after being pensioned off?) That was the simple-minded attitude of the bulk of the Muslim employees of the civil secretariat. Pakistan was a kind

of new province, with favourable employment chances for Muslims where one could go—and return to India to live, when one got pensioned off!

As for the working class Muslims—mostly weavers—of Panipat, they had no fascination for Pakistan which they neither understood nor approved, except as a remote place where Muslims would go, as on a pilgrimage.

As soon as the trains started bringing Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan—many of whom had suffered at the hands of the Punjabi Muslims—curfew was imposed on the city, ostensibly for the protection of Muslims. But the police inspector in charge of the *thana* was a refugee who had personally suffered at the hands of some Muslims of Lahore or Rawalpindi, and wanted to take his revenge on the Muslims of Panipat! So he would relax the curfew only for an hour or two, when the Muslims were to make their purchases. But there was no meat to be had—as the goats and sheep were brought from the villages. For more than a month all the women and children of our family subsisted on boiled *daal* and *chapaties*. My mother was a regular *pan*-eater, and *pans* had become a rare luxury. The price went up from four *pan* leaves per pice to one rupee for a single *pan* leaf, which my mother would divide into ten little pieces for consumption. There was no male member—except little children who were already showing signs of malnutrition, as milk was not to be had for love or money.

It was in this state of siege that, one late evening, the police came and knocked on our door.

“A military lorry has come for you from Delhi—we can give you half an hour to be ready. Take with you what you can carry with you, as there is no transport. The lorry is standing near the *tehsil*.” That was nearly two miles from our house. So the ladies and children had to pack the small suitcases and portable bundles to carry on their heads. The women had to discard their *burqas* for the first time in their lives. (I had talked and written about historical compulsions doing away with purdah, but I felt sad to hear the circumstances in which, to save their lives, *burqas* had to be discarded by my mother and sisters).

Before leaving the house, my mother had nailed to the door

two signboards which she had got prepared beforehand. They said that this house belonged to Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, and his mother and sisters were going to him in Bombay, *and not to Pakistan*. They had every intention of returning to Panipat. The signboard was in Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi.

Having done that, they locked the doors and left in the starlight, their footsteps sounding eerily in the cobbled lanes and by-lanes. Before long they heard the distant sound of metal striking metal. My mother did not like to believe that the locks of our house could be broken open, had been broken open.

Later, when they boarded the lorry, the south Indian military driver and the guards saluted the ladies and, when on their way, asked them who they were for whom the Prime Minister was so concerned. He had himself instructed them to bring the family safely to Delhi. My mother told him that I was known to Pandit Nehru, and had sent him a telegram.

"So you are not going to Pakistan?"

"God forbid!" My mother used the Urdu phrase "*Khuda na karay*," and added proudly that her son was a nationalist.

They lived for fifteen days in Delhi, while I went about scrounging money to bring them to Bombay by air. All my friends, impecunious as they were, contributed their mite. The air fare in those days was Rs 112 per ticket. That was just enough for them to fly back, I would have to go by train. That very day news appeared that in the states of Rajasthan through which the Frontier Mail would be passing, Muslims were being dragged out of trains and massacred. I was too well-known to pretend to be a non-Muslim—also I had my own self-respect and scruples about hiding my identity. So again my friend Manmohan came to my rescue, he volunteered to go in my place and to bring back the luggage by train, and to send the women by air.

When I saw him off at Bombay Central, little did I know that from his own compartment some helpless Muslims would be dragged out at the Bharatpur station and beheaded just outside the railway premises. That ghastly sight, and the sense of shock that it could lie *my* fate, gave Manmohan the jitters and the shivers. By the time he reached Delhi, he had high fever!

The day my mother and the rest of the family arrived, I and my wife were at the airport. We were taken aback to see the

rickety condition of the children—specially of six-year old Anwar Abbas, my nephew, who is now an Air India executive, but whose physical weakness and proneness to a variety of illnesses, and his surprising nervousness in planes in flight, are all directly traceable to the lack of nutritious food during those days. My mother was frail as before, but in good spirits. I had imagined her to be in tears about leaving Panipat, about having been compelled to discard purdah, and about all that she had suffered. Perhaps she was. But she never let a word of complaint escape her lips. She said to me after embracing me with more than normal warmth, “I like this travel by aeroplane. I am always going to travel by air. One feels so much nearer God.”

Two days later, I wrote a long letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, thanking him on behalf of my family, for his kindness and consideration, and telling him of what Manmohan had seen at Bharatpur station. That was the only letter to which I did not get a reply. Perhaps I should have written about my own family which he had been able to save, and not about the Muslims at Bharatpur whom he could not save. There was only one Jawaharlal, and there were too many swords in India—and in Pakistan—for him to grab.

I felt no hatred for Pakistan or Pakistanis. How could I when there were my relations, my friends whom I admired and loved? But (contradictory as it might seem) I was dismayed by the concept of “one religion, one country” which was at the root of Pakistan. I felt instinctively antagonistic to this concept, and whatever the rationalizations of the *fait accompli*, I would never be able to make peace with this concept. I know there are Pakistanis-in-dhoties—the RSS, the Jan Sanghis, and the DMK which would like to have a Tamilian “Pakistan” in the south of India! While I wished Pakistanis all luck in building up their country, it became a secret obsession of mine to try and bring back at least some intellectuals who belonged to Indian areas, but who had been persuaded by family considerations, or by political compulsions, to migrate to Pakistan.

In 1948 I wrote an “Open Letter to Sahir Ludhianvi” in the now-defunct *India Weekly* in which I appealed to this young Indian poet to return to India. I reminded him that so long as

he did not change his name, he would for ever be regarded as an *Indian* poet, unless Pakistan invaded and conquered Ludhiana. To my surprise, some copies of the paper did find their way to Lahore where Sahir read it. And, to my considerable surprise and joy, he (along with his late old mother) came back to India and, after initial difficulties, made a name for himself as a distinguished literary influence in films, while retaining his progressive ideology.

I was anxious, likewise, to recall Syed Sajjad Zaheer also, but he was under instructions from the Communist Party to stick it out there. When in the Rawalpindi conspiracy case he was detained for an indefinite period, along with his friend, the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz and others, I thought the door was closed for ever on his likely return. But after years, when he was released from jail, once again I was anxious for this amiable and soft-spoken communist's return. The communists, too, felt like recalling him but the trouble was that their relations with the Nehru government were not as they would be later. Who would give him a visa? Who would give him a nationality? There was only one person—Jawaharlal Nehru, and I undertook to broach the subject with him.

I went to Delhi and sought an appointment with the Prime Minister.

I asked him if he knew Sajjad Zaheer.

He said, "Of course, I have known him since he was a boy—he was in the AICC secretariat when I was first President."

I said he was in Pakistan and ill and needed the care and attention that only being with his wife and children would ensure.

"Who asked him to go to Pakistan?" He asked, rather sharply.

"I suppose his Party sent him to organize the Communist Party in Pakistan."

"He and his Party—they are all a pack of fools!" He exploded not with malice but affection. "Syed Sajjad Zaheer—our *Bannay Mian*—the aristocratic poet from Lucknow, was supposed to teach communism to the Punjabis and the Baluchis and the Sindhis!" The very idea, according to him, was ridiculous and preposterous. Then he added abruptly, "What do you want?"

I said I wanted him to come back to India and to be an Indian again, to live with his family and to be useful to his country.

"Hoon!" he thoughtfully said, "So you think so?"

I knew it was not a question, still I said, "Yes, Panditji."

"How many times I have told you not to call me 'Panditji.' I don't believe in it—nor do you!"

And that was the end of my interview.

I never broached the subject again. Yet, within a few months Sajjad Zaheer was given a visa to come to India, and within a year, he was an Indian citizen again. He published *Roshnai* (Ink), a monumental history of the Progressive Writers movement in India, revived the Progressive Writers movement, started the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, and, though still a member of the Communist Party of India, his urbanity and scholarship, even his poetry, won him a long list of friends and admirers in all parties and among no-party intellectuals. He died in 1973, in Tashkent, of a heart attack, while attending a meeting of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee.

But I have been anticipating events and giving a chronological "flash-forward."

Actually, we are at the beginning of 1948, and Gandhiji has just been assassinated. I was one of those who were expecting something of the sort to happen—either to Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru. It happened to Gandhi, martyrdom suited a saint. It was also appropriate that Gandhiji should have been killed by a Hindu. Nathuram Godse represented the worst features of Hinduism.

That evening, I was taking tea in the Parisian Dairy when I heard of the three fatal bullets having been fired at Gandhiji. The identity of the murderer was not immediately revealed, and when it was, I heaved a sigh of relief. Thank God, it was not a demented Muslim who had done the deed. Thereafter I could find peace only in a newspaper office, and though I had left the *Bombay Chronicle* and transferred even my "Last Page" to *Blitz* (where I was paid better, had more freedom to write as I felt, and where my by-line appeared every week). Still in a time of crisis like this, I could think only of a daily paper like the *Bombay Chronicle*. I was one of those who had prepared

a whole big file on Gandhiji's obituary three years earlier when he was fasting and death seemed imminent. Gandhiji survived his fast, toured Noakhali, Bengal and Bihar, saved thousands of Muslim and Hindu lives, survived another fast for peace, and finally succumbed to the assassin's bullets fired at him from point blank range.

I joined the group in the *Bombay Chronicle* that was feverishly bringing the obituary up to date. Someone had brought a portable radioset, and I could hear the tearful speech of Jawaharlal Nehru: "Friends and comrades, the light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere. I do not know what to tell you and how to say it. Our beloved leader, Bapu, as we called him, the Father of the Nation, is no more . . ."

I worked the whole night and the work helped to assuage the grief and sorrow I felt at the passing of Gandhiji. Muslims (of India and even of Pakistan) had particular reason to mourn his loss as it was for them that he had given his life. My mother, I found next day, had spent the night on the prayer-carpet, praying for the soul of Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhiji was still alive when the great drama of the Kashmir valley was being played out. The maharaja was holding out against joining India straight away, he was bargaining with both Pakistan and India for the most favourable terms for accession. He had already signed a standstill agreement with Pakistan and had been asked by the Government of India to sign the instrument of accession. This was a legal and constitutional necessity without which the Government of India could not intervene. Shaikh Abdullah was in jail since the Quit Kashmir movement when Jawaharlal Nehru, the head of the provisional government, was arrested at Kohala by the maharaja's police. I personally knew something about the Quit Kashmir movement, for I had gone there soon after the Shaikh Saheb's arrest and Nehru's expulsion. I had been shown the victims of the atrocities of Maharaja Hari Singh's police, who were lying in a hospital, by a young worker of the National Conference—a boy called Ali Mohamed Tariq. The same A.M. Tariq would later make a name for himself as a lieutenant of Nehru in Parliament, and, after Jawaharlal's death, would suffer demotion via the Indian Motion Pictures Export Corporation of which he

remained the controversial chairman for five years.

At the insistence of Jawaharlal Nehru, the Maharaja released Shaikh Abdullah from jail in September. The maharaja was still dillydallying when in October the Pakistani raiders attacked Kashmir under the leadership of Russell Height, an American who presumably belonged to the CIA. The maharaja drove overnight to the safety of Jammu with his *ranis* and his treasures and left the valley to the raiders and to God. It was at that time, while the raiders were burning and looting Uri and Baramulla, that tripartite negotiations took place between Jawaharlal Nehru and Shaikh Abdullah, and formally with Maharaja Hari Singh.

Shaikh Abdullah, the uncrowned King of Kashmir, was installed as the Head of the Emergency Administration, heading a provisional government of his associates released along with him from prison, and younger elements in the National Conference.

It was against this background that I found myself one day in the office of Jawaharlal Nehru.

"What do you want this time?" he asked me.

"I want to go to Kashmir."

He thought for a while, then said, "Don't you know there is a war going on? It can be dangerous going there."

I reminded him that already a number of progressive writers and artistes had reached Kashmir and there was no reason why I should not be there, alongside with them.

Again he lapsed into silence, scrutinized some papers on his table, then putting them away, he put an unexpected question to me: "Do you know what is the most popular slogan in Kashmir today?"

I was not prepared for this question, so I said, "*Sher-i-Kashmir Zindabad?*"

"You are a fool, Abbas. I expected a better answer from you. It seems you don't read the papers carefully. The most popular slogan in Kashmir today is:

Hamla-awar khabardar

Hum Kashmiri hain tayyaar!"

(Raiders, beware!"

We Kashmiris are ready for you.)

"Thank you, Sir. But can I go to Kashmir? I suppose special permission is necessary for that."

"Yes, I suppose you can go. But for that you will have to go and see Rafi Saheb. He might send you with some sacks of *ata*!"

So I went to Rafi Ahmed Kidwai.

I had heard much about him, and seen him on the Congress stage, but this was the first time I was face to face with him. He had evidently received a call from the Prime Minister, because he didn't ask me why I wanted to go to Kashmir. He only asked whether I would be able to take a plane next day at six in the morning. I said I was prepared to leave even at midnight.

Just as he was signing the slip of paper, a frail handsome woman of about forty entered the room and Rafi Saheb got up from his seat to give respect to her. There was something about this lady that commanded respect. She was dressed in a plain white khaddar sari and carried a khadi *jhola* with her.

"Bhabi," Rafi Saheb said after she had sat down, "what is it that you want?"

She replied that she needed at least four sacks of *ata* for the refugees.

There was a streak of sadness in her eyes, and in her personality generally, and I imagined that she was a widow of some friend of Rafi Saheb who was looking after some refugee camp. I thought she must be from Lahore or Rawalpindi or Lyalpur.

"You know that *ata* is needed in Srinagar, and we are air-lifting all that we can arrange," Rafi Saheb said apologetically, "If it is one or at most two sacks that you need . . ."

"All right," the lady assented, "let me have two today—but tomorrow I will be here again!"

Rafi Saheb gave her a chit and she departed after an "*Adab Arz*." Who was she, I wondered, who was collecting *ata* for the refugees, whom Rafi Saheb called "*Bhabi*," and who said "*Adab Arz*" when departing?

After she was gone, Rafi Saheb gave me a chit which simply said, "Khwaja Ahmad Abbas—one seat to Srinagar" and put the date of the next day.

I asked my old friend Ansar about the mysterious lady, and he said, "There is no mystery, she is Anees Apa, sister-in-law of Rafi Saheb. Her husband who was Municipal Commissioner of Mussoorie was killed in the communal riots, and the widow went to Gandhiji to seek some solace. He told her to serve the refugees."

"Muslim refugees who are in the Red Fort?"

"No. Hindu refugees. The Mahatma said serving Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan would give her real solace, even as he asked a Hindu lady whose husband had been killed by fanatical Muslims to serve the Muslim refugees!"

That was the Mahatma all over. He had his own method to heal the wounds of the spirit and the soul! He had already sent a Hindu refugee woman (also a widow) to look after the Muslim refugees.

Next morning, it was still dark when I presented myself at the Safdarjang airport.

A number of Dakotas were standing there, and I was given a seat in the first one leaving at exactly 6 a.m. when it was still dark.

I was inside the plane before I realized that there were no seats, the sacks of *ata*, *daal* and rice were strapped on both sides of the aisle. On one side was a slim military officer whom I could not see in the dark but I thought he must be fairly high up to be a passenger on this plane. There was no question of our "tying the safety belts," both of us sat on the pile of sacks on either side, fairly balancing the plane by our roughly equal weight, and clutching at the ropes that bound the sacks. The Banihal Road (with whose hairpin bends I was quite familiar having gone up that way more than once) was snowbound and this was the only route to supply the provisions to Kashmir. Part of the state—e.g., the Muzaffarabad district—was in Pakistani hands, but the valley proper and Jammu were saved by the self-help of the people of Kashmir, with the timely and decisive assistance of the Indian army.

"Good morning, Sir!"

"Good morning, my boy." He spoke in the accents of Sandhurst. "What is your name?"

I told him. There was the slightest flicker of recognition.

"You must be the writer. Have seen your name somewhere or the other."

I said it was possible. And now I asked the officer's "good name."

"Cariappa," he said simply in that Sandhurst accent of his.

"Cariappa!" A flash seemed to illuminate the situation. "Not General Cariappa, Sir?"

"Yes—General Cariappa! But now I am a fellow passenger with you, sitting on these sacks of *ata*, or is it rice, which mean life and death to the people of Kashmir."

"You mean, Sir," I stuttered, "they can't even provide a plane for an officer of your rank?"

"The rice and *ata* comes first" he simply said, then added, "All the planes are engaged in the airlift. I am going as far as Amritsar to inspect the border with 'Timmy' and the same plane, when returning, will take me back to Delhi."

At the Amritsar airport, I knew that "Timmy" meant (then) Brigadier (later General) Thimayya whom I was to know later in Kashmir as an art-loving general devoted to his wife's hobby of Bharat Natyam dancing. From him I also came to know of Coorg, the amazingly obscure little part of India, whose chief exports seemed to be senior officers of the Indian army!

At about noon our little plane landed on the Srinagar air strip. We were met by several army trucks and a jeep which seemed to have been sent for me. It was driven by a handsome young Kashmiri who was in woollen khaki trousers, thick boots, a buttonedup jodhpur coat, a fur cap, and a warm muffler round his neck. He also carried a rifle slung over his shoulder. "I am Deepee," he said which, at that time, meant nothing to me. But on the way to Srinagar he introduced himself more thoroughly as D.P. Dhar, one of Shaikh Abdullah's young men who seemed to be doing a dozen things—from training Kashmiri boatmen and farmers into a militia to keeping track of the infiltrators who were still prowling about the valley, and looking after the intellectuals who were coming in every day. "There are already nearly twenty of them and the guest house number three is fairly chock-full of them. But it doesn't matter. We will get another of the royal guest houses opened for you and those who come after you."

Later on, I came to know that he was Lucknow-educated (which meant the slightest Kashmiri accent), was a member of the Students Federation, and a friend of Sardar Jafri about whom he made solicitous enquiries. Finally, he revealed that he was the Deputy Home Minister in Shaikh Abdullah's Cabinet and, again, I was reminded of Spain where, young intellectuals were also drafted into ministerial positions and went about carrying rifles, at the time during the heroic (but, alas, hopeless) struggle against fascism!

"Guest house number one" proved to be a palatial affair, and the suite that was opened for me was last occupied by (if I remember right) the Maharaja of Patiala.

"But what does it matter?" D.P. told me when he unexpectedly jeeped in in the evening, "It's a revolution. The Maharaja has run away, and the people have taken over. Come on, let me take you to the other guest house where all your writer friends are staying—then I will leave you for my other work."

I was indiscreet enough to ask, "What is your work?"

"Hunting," he simply said, patting his rifle, "along with Bakhshi Saheb. We have heard of some raiders hiding behind the airport."

He jeeped me through frost on the ground—it hadn't begun to snow then—to the other guest house where a dozen or more writers were gathered round the fireplace—Ramanand Sagar, (who has since become a successful film producer) who was then completing his novel about partition, *Aur Insan Mar Gaya*; Rajinder Singh Bedi who was collecting material for *Namak*, his epic story of salt, and its importance in the life of Kashmir; Mrs Chandrakiran Sonrexa who was a short story writer but was now writing a novel; Navtej Singh, the Punjabi writer of short stories and the son of the famous Punjabi writer Gurbaksh Singh of *Preet Lari*; Sher Singh (or was he Sher Jung?), the fighter and writer, who went about in a jeep in riot-torn Delhi, shooting at sight any arsonist, rioter or would-be murderer. Raj Bans Khanna (a nephew of Balraj Sahni by marriage), an intellectual and a leftist, who was the head of the Kashmiri national militia and had taken leave from his military duties to spend an evening with the writers.

The atmosphere reminded one of Spain and the International Brigade where, it was said, writers had come to live their

books, and poets had come to die for their poetry! The creativity of these writers was infectious and rashly I promised to read my latest story the next evening. As I walked back to my own guest house, the first snow-fall of the season was like a soft white carpet on the ground, glistening in the starlight. I decided there and then to complete a story in less than twenty-four hours and read it to my writer friends the next day. That story was *Sardarji* which, through a sheer misunderstanding, involved me in a court case and several adventures. But at that time these events were far off, in the womb of time. It gave me a great creative satisfaction to finish that story by the next night, and to read it to a group of appreciative friends, who all liked it very much—specially the three Sikh friends, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Navtej Singh, and Gurmeet Singh the photographer. At the end of it, a young army officer told me, "The story is very good, very effective in conveying its message of humanity. But if I were you I would not publish it for some years." I wish I had followed his advice!

Through the courtesy of D.P. and a National Conference worker, Gandarbali, I was lucky enough to visit the Uri front which was within a mile or so of the Pakistani forward lines. On the way, we passed through Baramulla, seeing the ruins of the once prosperous town (including the chapel which was in shambles) and were shown where Maqbul Sherwani, the young and intrepid National Conference worker, was tortured and ultimately shot.

The Uri sector was then under Brigadier (later General) Sen who was most cordial and cooperative. He even sent us with some soldiers to inspect the site of a skirmish the previous night, where some Pakistani raiders' dead bodies were still lying. There were three of them, presumably ignorant tribal people of the Frontier province and the cry of Jihad had brought them to their death in Uri. I was surprised, however, to find the Indian soldiers refer to them as "Musallahs" and not as Pakistanis! The subtlety of the correct nomenclature entirely eluded them. After all this was the war which was being waged with the help and assistance of the people of Kashmir, most of whom were Muslims and, thanks to their leader, the redoubtable Shaikh Abdullah, anti-Pakistanis.

This was the war in which, only a few miles away, a Muslim called Maqbul Sherwani rather died than give up his secular and pro-Indian attitude.

I took up the matter with Brigadier Sen and he expressed his helplessness in the matter. He said in effect, "It is difficult to change the thinking of these soldiers who are ignorant of the basic principles of secularism." I wanted to ask him: then what is this war about? What am I, a "Musallah," doing here? But I preferred to keep my mouth shut, making a mental note of it for reference to Jawaharlal Nehru, if and when I got a chance to discuss the matter with him.

We had our lunch in an orchard where apples hung invitingly low, and just then, we were presumably, sighted by the Pakistanis through their field glasses for two mortar shells fell dangerously close to us. This was real war, and we could have all died there and then, as Brigadier Usman was to die in another sector—the most important Muslim to lay down his life for secularism and Kashmir. Yet, I was not afraid of death in that moment. Was it because of the company I had—*Marg-e-Amboh jashn na darad* (When you die in a group, there is no celebration!)—or was it some sort of contagion of bravery? Anyway, when we returned to Srinagar along the hairpin bends of the serpentine hill road, we left the war behind. The danger of our jeep falling down the *khud* was more imminent and frightening than any Pakistani mortar shells could be!

That night or, maybe, a few nights later, I and D.P. discussed the chances of winning the plebiscite—if there was one. D.P. asked me what did I think of the chances? I told him the climate of Srinagar at that time was definitely against Pakistan. I had talked to Kashmiri craftsmen, boatmen, paddy farmers, porters—almost all of them Muslims—and they all had unpleasant experiences of the raiders who were uncouth fanatics who knew nothing. I could personally vouchsafe for this, for I had met a raider in Srinagar jail who could not read or write or articulate except to say that he was sent to save the Kashmiri Muslims from the tyranny of the Maharajah. When I told him that there was no Maharajah and the "big man" in Srinagar was Shaikh Abdullah, he remained silent and sullen. Evidently, he had not heard of the Shaikh Saheb's name.

"If there is going to be a plebiscite—and I find Panditji had

committed himself to it before the international public opinion—India should hold it within a month.” This was my opinion which I could express between friends. “Let India fix the date soon and give an ultimatum to Pakistan to clear out of the occupied territory—if they don’t, they will be responsible for the consequences. India would hold the plebiscite, wherever its writ runs—and then declare the results to the world. I don’t think we can go wrong, provided we work fast and don’t allow the ‘Islam in Danger’ cry to be raised!”

D.P. said thoughtfully, “You know, Khwaja Saheb, many of us here are also thinking along the same lines. Will you discuss it with Shaikh Saheb and, if he agrees, will you go to Delhi to suggest it to Panditji?”

I was afraid of Panditji, but willing to stick my neck out, and I said as much.

D.P. fixed the appointment with Shaikh Saheb the next day.

Shaikh Abdullah was surrounded by a big *Durbar*—farmers, and boatmen, fishermen, craftsmen, everyone could walk into his house, without much ceremony. He had known his people since the days he was a school teacher, and they knew him, and there was a democratic rapport between them. He was a five-times-a-day praying Muslim and that gave him a solid base for his leadership. The Kashmiri Muslim is essentially religious, and it was a miracle that Shaikh Abdullah had persuaded them that their salvation lay in working together with their Hindu compatriots, and so he had converted them to secularism, turning his original Muslim Conference into a National Conference.

“Who came to our help in the time of need, defying the power of the maharajah?” he would ask in his orations after Friday prayers.

The people would reply in chorus, “Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru!”

And Shaikh Abdullah would drive the shaft home by saying, “Not Jinnah Saheb, who was too busy hobnobbing with the maharajas and nawabs.”

The Shaikh was a simple man, simply dressed in the style of the upper middle class Kashmiris, and he spoke to the people in Kashmiri, their own language. It was obvious that they loved him and adored him.

When I came in, he excused himself and led me on to a

verandah which was flooded with the cold-weather sunlight.

"I am glad you have come again, Khwaja Saheb," he said, referring to my earlier visit when he was in jail. "I suppose now we can give you slightly better hospitality."

"Khwaja Saheb has some suggestion regarding the plebiscite," said D.P., afraid that our talk would drift into a series of polite exchanges.

"Yes?" Shaikh Saheb gave me the cue. Then he heard me patiently as I proposed my theory about an early plebiscite. "I feel that now is the time when the whole valley is reverberating with *Humla-awar khabardar—Hum Kashmiri hain tayyaar!* that the plebiscite should be held. It should not be postponed."

"I will not say yes. And I won't say no. Panditji must have his own reasons for delaying the plebiscite. It is better to discuss it with him first. Though you have made a plausible point, I will only do what my leader says."

Jawaharlal Nehru occupied his desk by the window and was tidying up the papers as I was ushered in. Outside it was already dark, and lights had to be switched on.

"Yes, Abbas, what news do you bring from Srinagar? Have you met Shaikh Saheb?"

I said, yes, I had.

"How do you find him?" he asked further.

I gave him, in brief, my impression of the Shaikh as a leader of his people.

Then nervous to broach the subject of the plebiscite, I told him about the Indian soldiers calling Pakistanis "Musallahs." "They don't know the difference," I said with some heat, "Why don't we give them some sort of political education? With each regiment there should be a political officer . . ."

"You mean," he interjected, "there should be a political commissar—as they have in the Soviet Union."

"Well, not exactly—but still . . ." I fumbled and flustered. But he reassured me.

"You are right, Abbas. But our officers—who have been trained on the British model—won't like that. But I promise you next time I have a chance I will talk to the troops about secularism and what it means in the struggle for Kashmir. The officers won't resent this particular political commissar."

Here was my cue to talk about the thing I had come to talk about. "You have also to take a decision about the plebiscite soon."

"What plebiscite you are talking about?"

Then the words came gushing out of my mouth. I told him that now the situation was propitious, the people of the valley experienced the raiders' atrocities, they remembered what was done to Maqbool Sherwani. They hated the raiders who had been sent from Pakistan. If the plebiscite was held soon enough not more than a handful of fanatical Muslim Leaguers would vote for Pakistan. The rest would all plump for India.

Jawaharlal listened to me in silence, doodling on a scratch pad with his pencil. Then, when I finished, he said, "You know that I have made it clear in the constituent assembly that as soon as law and order had been restored in Kashmir and the soil cleared of the invaders, the question of the State's accession should be settled by reference to the people. We have said that if the Pakistan government are sincere, they can stop the entry of these raiders. The moment peace and order are restored, let the people of Kashmir decide and we shall accept their decision. You want me to go back on that?"

I tried to argue that it was not the question of the raiders, now it was the Pakistan army that was in control of the Pak-occupied areas.

"We know that," he said rather testily, "that is why we have suggested that when the peaceful conditions returned to the state, the people should be given a chance to decide their future, and this should be done under the supervision of the United Nations Organization."

I ventured to say that some of us did not have much faith in the UNO.

"Then what do you want us to do?" he almost shouted.

"I want you to give an ultimatum to Pakistan that on such and such date you are going to hold a plebiscite, and by that date they must clear out of the areas occupied by them."

"And do you imagine they would just pack up and leave?"

"No, Sir. But the point is that before the world you would have given them a chance. After that you go ahead and hold the plebiscite where you can."

"And have the world say that India is a liar, that Nehru has

gone back on his word? No, Abbas. A plebiscite requires peace and tranquility for the people to calmly and dispassionately decide between the two alternatives."

"I beg your pardon, Sir. But to my way of thinking, it is when there is no peace and tranquility that a plebiscite is required!"

I thought I had cooked my own goose. I expected for the bell to be rung and the *pattewala* to be summoned to throw me out. The bell was, indeed, rung. The *pattewala* appeared. I waited for the orders to be physically thrown out.

But he said to his servant, "Bring us some tea, please."

Then he placatingly said to me. "Have a cup of tea before you go. I like spirit in young men. But I can't break my word. If I did, people would say that India's Prime Minister is not to be trusted. He is no gentleman."

I said no more on the subject. I finished my cup of tea in sullen silence, while Jawaharlal told me to give his greetings to Shaikh Saheb and others in Kashmir. Finally I took leave of him. He shook hands with me rather warmly.

As I stepped out in the cold winter air, I shivered at the thought that here was a gentleman in a world of crooks where being a gentleman was dangerous.

I still held to my view that India would have saved itself from many troubles if a plebiscite had been held then. But I couldn't help loving and admiring and adoring the man who preferred being a gentleman!

32. Perils of Progressive Literature

A literary career, unless one belongs to the class of ivory tower escapists, can be quite as thrilling—and as dangerous—as that of a revolutionary or a professional soldier. And the hazards of progressive literature are—or were—even greater in India than anywhere else in the world. Indeed, short story writing might very well be classed by insurance companies as one of the “hazardous professions.”

Thirty-five years ago I wrote a story *Sarkashi* (Revolt) which depicted the decision of a Muslim girl to revolt against the fanaticism of her family, and to marry—a Hindu! No sooner did the story appear in an Urdu magazine published from Delhi, than both the editor and myself started receiving abusive and threatening letters from outraged Muslims who thought I had dealt a dastardly blow at Islam by having my fictitious character marry a Hindu “infidel.” The editor published an apology and after that, never invited me to contribute to his magazine. The Muslim communalist press published long indictments against me, references were made to the “anti-Muslim story” in post-prayer sermons in mosques, and I was assured of eternal damnation.

Hardly had this storm blown over that I happened to write an “anti-Hindu story”—at least that was what the Mahasabhit Urdu papers of Lahore (then in India) called my *Bara Ghantay* (Twelve Hours) which was rather a daring story of an idealistic girl surrendering her body to an old and popular revolutionary leader who came out of prison after twenty years and was to be rearrested in the morning, after only one night of freedom. Out of compassion, rather than passion, the girl surrendered her body, of her own free will, to the revolutionary. The name of the girl being Bina, my critics logically deduced that the story had been written by the “Muslim” author for the specific purpose of corrupting the morals of Hindu youths!

I got my share—and have been getting it for long, of inaugurating this and that conference. Once I was invited to inaugurate the Kerala Peace Conference. I reached Cochin to be “welcomed” by a strong posse of police. On arrival, the DSP came forward and served me with a notice not to disturb the peace of the state. I had a mind to take the same plane back to Bombay, but a vigorous shaking of the hands prevented me. I kept quiet and asked for the details of the document. I was not to speak anywhere in the territory of the state of Cochin and Travancore. My hosts had made alternate arrangement. So I said now that I am here I would just take a jeep ride through the countryside. This I did—except that it brought me at the Travancore and Cochin border where in fine view of the border police arrangements had been made for a large-scale conference. There were chairs, benches and even a microphone and loud-speakers. I spoke for two hours—and the helpless policemen watched me from afar. Even if they had come forward, I doubt if anything could have made any sense to them!

And then some of my Sikh friends were agitated over a story of mine entitled *Sardarji* and I was being accused of defaming the Sikhs which was particularly unfortunate and distressing because the story was actually written with just the opposite intention—to glorify the chivalrous and humanitarian conduct of certain Sikhs who actually risked their lives to save their Muslim neighbours including members of my family. But apparently subtlety has been my undoing. And thereby hangs a tale—or tales—as it is really the story of a story.

Normally, every story has two stories. There is the story told by the author, whether it is purely fiction or based on a real life incident, with its beginning, middle and the end. Then there is the story of how and why the story came to be written, typed or dictated. Most of my stories are fact-based—that is why certain literary critics insist that they are not stories at all, but bad journalism masquerading as literature. That may be so. But, in my story called *Sardarji* (which I have already described how and why it came to be written) I unwittingly added a third dimension to story writing which is at least as interesting—and more exciting—as the original story I had set out to relate.

The story, based on a true incident, that happened to members of a branch of my own family, was written in Srinagar and next day read out to a gathering of writers, artists including three Sikhs. Even with their approval, I did not rush the story to print. I have made it a principle to work on a story like a watchmaker, I want it to be perfect in all its "jewels," I want it to tick. I never write a story for money, though it might bring me some money. I make my living by freelance journalism and by scriptwriting for films. The stories I write (and, incidentally the films I direct and produce) are my creative indulgences. Indeed, I do not write a story till the story itself compels me to write it. That is why in forty years I have written a little over a hundred stories—which works out, to an average of less than three stories per year of my writing life.

So, when I wrote *Sardarji*, I asked my friend Rajinder Singh Bedi where to send it. He suggested a Pakistani journal to which he, Krishenchander, Manto and Ismat Chughtai were regular contributors. The purpose of your story would be served, he said, only if it is published in a popular literary journal of Pakistan. He also advised me to cut out some of the more offensive remarks against the Sikhs which were put in the mouth of a rabid communalist, Shaikh Burhanuddin, the villain-hero of the story. In the prevailing conditions in the country, they were likely to be misunderstood. I was glad to carry out the corrections according to Bedi's suggestions.

When I returned to Delhi, I showed the story to Krishenchander and consulted him about the remarks excised at the instance of Bedi. "The offending remarks are, after all, not made by you—they are the remarks of a communalist Muslim named Burhanuddin—that is how such people think and say in their ignorance and because of prejudice." But, few readers were likely to have the humanity and the sense of humour of Krishenchander, and so I carried out the corrections suggested by Bedi, and sent the story to *Adab-i-Lateef* in Lahore.

Later, I was glad to get a letter from Chaudhrie Barkat Ali, the publisher, in which he described the story as "the year's best short story . . . we have received hundreds of letters appreciating the story. Among them are not only Muslims but many of them are Hindu and Sikh readers."

Then I heard from a friend that the popular Hindi short story

magazine *Maya* of Allahabad had reprinted the story, in a transliterated version—without my permission or without even informing me.

As a writer, I was happy with the success of the story. My writing had been published in both countries—Pakistan and India—and in both languages—Urdu and Hindi! Reasonable persons in both the countries had appreciated it. Perhaps it had helped a few hundred (or even a few thousand) prejudiced Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs to purge their minds of the poison of prejudice, and their hearts of hatred for each other. For me *Sardarji* had fulfilled its mission and I began to think of other stories: I didn't know that the story of this story had not ended. It had only begun.

The first shot was fired from Pakistan. News came from there that the communalist press was attacking *Sardarji* and its "anti-Muslim writer," and demanding legal action against *Adab-i-Lateef*. I was not surprised to hear this, rather I was satisfied that communalism was squirming under the attack. My aim had not misfired.

But I was certainly surprised to hear from some of my Sikh friends that in some Gurudwara, violent speeches were delivered against the story *Sardarji* and its writer. Someone had brought a copy of *Adab-i-Lateef* and read out the beginning portion of the story and, without ending the story (which would have shown its real pro-Sikh bias) torn it to bits. This both surprised me and pained me.

I gave the story to a young Sikh friend of mine, he read it to the end and liked it so much that he read the whole of it out to his old father, who too liked it. After hearing the end he knew that the story had no anti-Sikh bias but was a satire against communalist Muslims. He went to the local Gurudwara and explained the original purpose of the story, and not to mistake a friend for an enemy. I thought whatever misunderstanding had been there was now removed. I received a call from Kashmir to come and help them to carry on counter-propaganda against Pakistan. The invitation was both for me and my wife. And so this time the two of us flew together to Srinagar.

There I was privileged to come into close contact with a number of important people—Shaikh Saheb (whom I instinctively

liked), Bakhshi Saheb (who was too suave, circumspect and oily for me), my old friend D.P., my new friend Cartier-Bresson, the internationally-famous French photographer and his Indonesian dancer wife, Ratna (who, I thought, were a perfect couple and whose later separation came as something of a shock to me). I also met General Thimayya and found him an art enthusiast, beside being a tough and imaginative soldier. The first exhibition of Raza's Kashmir paintings was held in our house-boat, and all these friends came there. The same Raza, I and my wife were later to meet in Paris when he had settled down with his French wife to acquire world fame as a modern painter.

I was also glad to make friends with Kashmiri writers—including the worker poet *Aasi*, the novelist and short story writer Prem Nath Pardesi, Arif, Somnath Zutchi and Aima, the brilliant intellectual who, as a singer, had brought about a renaissance of Kashmiri folk music. All these people often gathered in our houseboat which acquired the reputation of being a literary and artistic centre for creative talent in Kashmir.

Little of the furore over the story raised in Bombay, U.P. and other states managed to reach Srinagar. At best, it was a faint echo. But I became aware of the horrible misunderstanding that was being spread about my story. The representative religious organization of the Sikhs, the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, sent telegrams to the Prime Minister, Home Minister, and the Chief Minister of U.P. in which, inter alia, it was stated that

In the Hindi magazine *Maya* of Allahabad some *Muslim Leaguer* Khwaja Ahmad Abbas has written a provocative, mean and dirty *Article* which makes one wonder whether it is a Pakistani magazine or a Hindi magazine of India whose proprietor is a Hindu. By the publication of the *Article* there is a wave of anger among Hindus and Sikhs We demand the confiscation of this issue and exemplary punishment be awarded to the author, printer and publisher of this *Article*. Only then can our wounded sentiments be assuaged. (Emphasis mine—K.A.A.)

Such telegrams of protest are nothing new to an Indian journalist. But two words intrigued and disturbed me.

Article?

Muslim Leaguer?

How did a story become an article? Surely even the most simple-minded reader of magazines knows the difference.

How did a lifelong nationalist and socialist become a Muslim Leaguer?

One word—or, rather, one letter—had created this ridiculous but nevertheless dangerous misunderstanding. That word—or letter—was “I.”

The short story, *Sardarji* was narrated in the first person singular, purporting to be the confessions of the central character, Burhanuddin, a clerk in the central secretariat. This was not a new technique. For several hundred (if not thousand) years, novelists and short story writers had used it—from Dickens’ *David Copperfield* to Qazi Abdul Ghaffar’s *Laila ke Knatoot*, from Saratchandra Chatterji’s *Shrikant*, to Krishenchander’s story *Ek Tawaif ka Khat*. If no one ever mistook Charles Dickens to be a child, or Qazi Abdul Ghaffar to be a beauty named Laila, Sarat Chatterji to be a romantic wanderer, and Krishenchander to be a prostitute, then how was Khwaja Ahmad Abbas mistaken to be a communalist?

But who would explain the subtleties of literary genre to inflamed minds full of prejudices and hatreds?

The editor of a Delhi newspaper wrote to me requesting a special article for the Independence number. And on the very next day the same newspaper published reports and letters against me in which I was called a communalist and a betrayer of the national cause. Perhaps, in his editorial pre-occupations, he did not realize that the two men were the same!

Another newspaper which published my weekly column *Azad Qalam* on the same page as the resolutions passed against me by communal organizations of Hindus and Sikhs. But the most interesting, and preposterously amusing allegations were made by an Urdu paper of Delhi.

There was a Muslim communalist daily called *Anjaam* published from Delhi. From 15 August 1947, there its sister-paper, also called *Anjaam*, being published from Karachi. The Karachi *Anjaam* supported Pakistan. The Delhi *Anjaam* supported and even flattered the Government of India. The Karachi

Anjaam demanded the confiscation of *Adab-i-Lateef* and the prosecution of its printer and publisher, since the author was out of its reach. But he was denounced as being anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim.

About the same time, the Delhi *Anjaam* published two editorials the headings of which may be translated as "Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's Universal Mischief-Mongering" and "New Devilry of an anti-Muslim." Fantastic cameos were paraded and published in these editorials which described me as a "Pakistani agent," "an old agent of British imperialism," "the same man who had accompanied a damn scoundrel from Moradabad to Turkey to murder Mustafa Kamal Pasha who, finding himself in danger, returned to India in a freight ship". . . "Today he has authored a new devilry by which he hopes to create massacres of the Muslims in India and the non-Muslims in Pakistan. This murder-able (*gardan-zadni*) person has published a story called *Sardarji* . . . We are surprised why he and the publisher of *Maya* were not immediately murdered . . . Our Sikh bretheren do not know that this scoundrel (who is now sitting safely in Pakistan) is an old agent of the British and it is his business to think of new schemes to create murderous mischief" and so on.

It was only four months later, when I returned to Bombay, that I read these articles, and threatened legal action against the editor. Promptly an apology was published and a refutation of those two editorials "which were written by the writer without proper enquiry" and admitted that "what was written was based on pure invention, and had no relation to reality."

But this was a chronological aside, we are still in August 1948. When I knew of the storm that my story had created I wrote a letter in English to the President of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (with copies to the U.P. Chief Minister and other leaders). In the course of this letter I made it clear that

- (1) *Sardarji* was not an article but a short story.
- (2) Its aim was not to defame the Sikh but to satirize the prejudices that communalist Muslims still harboured against the Sikhs.

(3) The "I" of the story was a fictitious character, and certainly not the author. The ghastly misunderstanding had been created by mistaking a short story for an "article."

(4) If by reading some parts of this story, the sentiments of my Sikh friends and brothers were hurt by a misunderstanding, then I was intensely sorry, because my aim was to idealize a brave and humanist "*Sardarji*."

(5) I was not a communalist, and was a staunch opponent of the Muslim League and the concept of Pakistan. My numerous articles on the subject had been published in dozens of papers in India.

(6) I could have neither prejudice against, nor hatred, for the Sikhs as some of my best friends and comrades happened to be of Sikh faith. In the riots several members of my family were saved by Sikhs, and indeed it was this that inspired the story.

(7) The rapid communalist papers of Pakistan were writing against this story because, according to them, it depicted Muslims unfairly and glorified the Sikhs.

Having written this letter, and a "*Last Page*" on the subject, I was satisfied that now at last the misunderstanding would be removed, and with a perfectly easy heart I accompanied General Thimayya and a party of correspondents on a tour of the forward defence positions of the army in Kashmir.

At one of these forward bases, we were split up and I found myself spending the night in a bunker hardly a mile from the Pakistani forward positions. I was not dismayed when I found only Sikh officers and *jawans* in that bunker—till a young Sikh officer, after a great deal of hesitation, asked me if I was the same Abbas who wrote stories.

I admitted as much.

Then he said, "We took you to be non-communal and a nationalist. Why did you write a story against the Sikhs?"

I asked him, "Have you read the story?"

He said he had not, only heard about it and was surprised.

At that time, as a precaution, I used to carry that issue of *Adab-i-Lateef* in my briefcase.

So I asked him, "Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes," not only he but all of them said in a chorus.

I opened my portfolio, took out the copy of the magazine but made a stipulation before reading the story to them. "Promise me that if you want to kill me, you will do so only after you have heard the story to the very end."

They all laughed at it and assured me that they had no intention of killing me, but they confessed to being curious about the story which had created a furore in the country and in their community.

It was one of my weaknesses as a writer that I always find an excuse to read out my stories to my friends. But were they my friends? Or were they my enemies? Still I had to keep a stiff upper lip and started reading the story in the light of a candle stuck in the neck of an empty rum bottle. It was certainly a bizarre experience, and the occasional sounds of Pakistani guns and mortars provided an unusual counterpoint.

The officers were ready to laugh at the satirical allusions, but the men were grim-faced as I began the story. As the story progressed beyond the danger point, I found a relaxation of tension among the *jawans*. As the climax neared, they were all silent—some even had tears in their eyes. As I read the last line, "This was not Sardarji who had died—It was I who was dead!" for a moment there was utter silence.

Then the young officer spoke, "For writing this story," he paused before delivering the judgment, "we make you an honorary Sikh."

I was too exhausted after reading the story, and the accompanying tension because I did not know how it will effect them, and could not immediately comprehend the joke of it.

"What shall I have to do?" I asked, placing the *Adab-i-Lateef* in my satchel.

"Well, we can't ask you to grow your hair?" the young officer said.

I nodded assent.

"And we can't give you *kada prasad* here in this dugout?"

"No, you can't." I said timidly.

"But we can give you a peg of rum, to celebrate the event."

I explained that I was a teetotaller.

"But this is a special occasion, when Sikh soldiers are asking you to drink—at the point of gun!"

At last I laughed, took up the offered glass.

Everyone's glass was filled.

They all said, "Cheers" and sipped, savouring the awful smelling rum.

"Sat Sri Akal," I said, and holding my breath gulped the rum in one drought.

At another place on the front we met another batch of Sikh officers, and one of them—a studious chap—told me that the *Liberator*, a weekly paper of Delhi edited by Sardar Gopal Singh, had written a series of articles in favour of *Sardarji* and its author, and advised me to look them up.

In Srinagar I got the copies of the *Liberator* and was pleased with what I read. At least there *were* Sikhs who had not only understood but appreciated, the purpose and purport of the story. Afterwards I was gladdened to read the editorial comments of the late Shri Krishan Dutt Paliwal, the well-known Congress leader, and the editor of the Hindi *Sainik*, in which he went so far as to say "that in our opinion, for writing such a humanitarian story the author should be rewarded . . . at moments his pinching remarks exposing communal prejudices are such that one feels like kissing his hand out of sheer gratitude."

In the end Shri Paliwal made a prophetic concluding paragraph:

" . . . It is our contention that if the Government decides to file a case in a court against the author and publisher, then it will be the laughing stock of the country, and the officer who has got the Government into this mess will not be able to show his face in public"

I was also receiving any number of letters from enlightened and progressive Sikhs and Hindus who had read and appreciated the story—I can now remember only two names, Sardar Mohinder Singh Rekhi, a refugee from West Punjab, then somewhere in the Punjab, and Jashwant, a youth from New Delhi.

But the engines of the bureaucracy, like the mills of God, grind slowly, painfully—and blindly!

At last the summons arrived one day and was duly served on me, in the presence of Shaikh Abdullah, the then Prime Minister of Kashmir. Roughly translated, the paper read:

Summons

In the Court of Shri Ansari, Magistrate First Class, Allahabad.

Addressed to the accused.

Shri Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, writer, C/o Shaikh Mohamed Abdullah, Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Srinagar.

Since your presence is imperative for the purpose of answering the charges under Section 153-A and 295-A, you are hereby ordered to present yourself in the above Court on 25th October 1948. Regard this as obligatory.

And so I flew down to Delhi and, leaving my wife there to go back to Bombay, I took a train to Allahabad.

The writers of Allahabad—more of Hindi than of Urdu, more non-communists than communists, but both progressive and non-progressive writers—were already in battle array, duly mobilized in my defence.

The mobilizer-in-chief was my old friend, the well-known writer of Urdu and Hindi short stories and novels, who already had experience of the police and courts when his play *Toofaan se Pehlay* (Before the Storm), which was written for the IPTA's campaign to stem the tide of the riots in Bombay, was declared "dangerous" by the literary experts of the Bombay police. Ashk who was then (and still is) suffering from tuberculosis, had just reached Allahabad, and was advised to take rest away from the damp and humidity of Bombay.

Before I arrived in Allahabad, Ashk had already held two meetings—one of progressive writers and the other of non-committed writers and journalists—and at both the story *Sardarji* was read out. Evidently it created quite a good impression, because after these gatherings a joint statement, signed by about forty writers and journalists, was issued, in the course of which it was said:

... the author has delved deep to portray human emotions, and used delightful satire and beautiful artistry. To place such an author on trial is tantamount to an attack on real art and literature, and is also tantamount to surrendering to the worst forces of communalism The signatories appeal to

all writers of India, writing in any language to stand by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and thus to prove that they shall not allow communalism and fanaticism to throttle creative literature.

Among the signatories were the veteran Urdu poet Professor Raghupati Sahai *Firaq* (Gorakhpuri), the famous Hindi short story writer Ilachand Joshi, the doyens of Hindi poetry *Pahari* and Sumitra Nandan Pant, the well-known poetess Mahadevi Verma, the Urdu critic Professor Ejaz Husain,¹ and his counterpart in Hindi, the critic Prakash Chandra Gupta.

My original and desperate idea was not to offer any defence in the court and to let them send me to jail which, I thought, would by itself be a comment on the situation and a criticism of the government. Also it would provide a much-needed *darshan* of jail which I had unfortunately missed in the British era. But then two factors made me revise my judgment. The touching solidarity displayed by the writers of Allahabad, specially the Hindi writers, to many of whom I was then completely unknown. I couldn't let them down. Nor could I let down the editor and the publisher of *Maya* who had transliterated the story in good faith—and with good intentions.

I had occasion to make friends with the Hindi and Urdu poets and writers of U.P. Besides those I have already mentioned I must mention Wamiq (whose *Bhooka hai Bengal* song I had already used in *Dharti ke Lal*), Vatsayen, Ram Pratap Bahadur, Athar Parvaz, Devender Issar, Mehmood Ahmed Hunar (who had started all the trouble by translating the story into Hindi for *Maya*), my old IPTA colleague Nemi Chand Jain and his wife Rekha, besides dozen of young writers, and hundreds of literary-minded students of the Allahabad University.

Also during a long court recess, I took an opportunity to visit Lucknow to meet my Urdu writer friends—Al-e Ahmed Suroor, Dr Aleem (later vice-chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, and presently the president of the Urdu Board!), my poet friend *Majaz*, the critic and professor (the late) Ehtisham Husain, and the late Ali Abbas Husaini, the novelist and story writer.

At that time, the governor of U.P. was none other than Mrs

¹Since then, alas, he has expired.

Sarojini Naidu, and when she came to know that I was in town, she invited me to the Raj Bhawan. There, seated on a divan, she asked me to read out the controversial story—which I carried everywhere with me. I read it out aloud to her and she sat, smiling occasionally at my sallies of humour, but lost in thought towards the end. There was a moment of suspense and then she smiled, called me to her, patted me on the back, and said, “The story is very good but”

She paused. I wanted to know what came after that. So I ventured to prompt her. “But”

“But you are an ass!” was her comment. She spoke in her chaste Urdu. “*Kahani bohat achchi hai lekin . . . tu gadha hai!*”

“Why?” I asked.

“Don’t you know how sensitive our people are—with no understanding of humour or satire—specially in these days of communal tension!”

She was right, of course. But I noticed that she walked with difficulty, with the help of a walking stick. She gave me some exquisite *sherbet* and then hobbling on her stick, she walked away, dragging her diabetic heavy frame with some difficulty. That was the last time I saw her.

When I returned to Allahabad, I saw a couple of plain-clothesmen who were unmistakably CID people at the door of Kazmi Saheb’s bungalow. They got up and, forgetting they were not to reveal their identity, saluted me.

“What’s all this?” I demanded to know.

“Nothing, Sir. We have been placed here for your protection.”

“At whose orders?”

“We are not supposed to inform you, Sir,” the plain-clothesmen confided in me, “But *Laath* Saheb’s orders have come to the police commissioner saheb to see that no harm is done to you.”

Now, I knew that two weeks ago, my friend Ramanand Sagar (before partition a journalist, then a struggling film writer in Bombay who was then writing a novel about partition) had written to me that he had sent a petition to the governor of U.P. asking that police protection be afforded to me, as these were dangerous times, and any time any misguided Hindu or Sikh

refugee might do harm to me because of the story which he might not have read!

After that those men became like my shadow, going everywhere I went and keeping themselves unobtrusively in the background.

One day the devil got into me. I started on a bicycle, with the two also cycling beside me.

After a hundred yards, I told one of them to go back to the house and bring my raincoat, as it was likely to rain. He went back. Then, after a few yards more of cycling, I happened to remember something else, and despatched the second one to go home and reminded him to also bring my hat. To reassure him I got down from the bicycle and started walking backwards towards the house.

The two men went home and insisted on taking my raincoat and hat—which, of course, were not there. Kazmi Saheb knew I had tricked my “protectors” and he detained them by ransacking my room. I was, meanwhile, enjoying a chuckle at the house of Sri Krishen Das, secretary of the defence committee that had been set up for my legal aid. Sri Krishen Das was a big man with a diminutive wife (whom I teased often by calling her “Sarda Act”), an erudite scholar of Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, folk songs and folk theatre.

One could spend hours with him in his house, and I returned only at nightfall, and Sri Krishen Das thoughtfully came to leave me.

“Just in case . . .” he insisted.

The two men heaved a sigh of relief and implored Sri Krishen Das, “Please ask your friend not to go alone. Who knows what might have happened? And we would have lost our jobs.” Then one of them asked, “By the way why is there a danger to his life?”

Sri Krishen Das replied, “Because he is a writer and does not know that in a country without a sense of humour, some kinds of writing can be dangerous.”

They shook their heads in agreement, though I doubt if they had any inkling of what he was talking about.

At last the date of the third hearing came. On that day a white-

bearded old gentleman from Jhansi, was to appear as the star witness. Actually, the whole case had started by a memorandum received from him. But he was very old and ill and so could not attend the earlier hearings.

While the court was busy with some other case, the old gentleman was standing in the verandah. Someone pointed him out to me. On his side, too, some younger aide pointed me out to him. Inevitably we gravitated. I *namaskared* the old gentleman, and enquired after his health.

"My trouble is old age and asthma," he confided in me.

"What do you take for it?" I enquired solicitously, "My mother has asthma, too, and she always carries Ephedrine."

The old Sardar dug into the folds of his robes, and produced an unmistakable box of Ephedrine tablets of which he proceeded to take one.

"It is my only life-saver! Who suggested it to your mother?"

I told him that it was Doctor Ansari who was a friend of my father.

"Very great doctor—Ansari Saheb. Very good medicine—Ephedrine!"

The conversation was proceeding along smoothly and we were exchanging information about asthma which I had because of my mother. Then the old man (who might have been the original Sardarji of my story) very kindly asked me, "You are such a nice young man! Why did you write such a dirty article against the Sikhs?"

Now was my chance and I decided to take it. I said, "Sardarji, have you read the whole story?"

Promptly came the reply, "How could I? Only one paragraph was enough to set my blood boiling."

I disarmed him by saying, "It was meant to. I wanted you to get into the mind and heart of a fanatical Muslim—and to show how Sardarji—the Sardarji of my story—could change even such a fanatic by love and sacrifice."

He was doubtful, but was honest enough to say, "It would be like magic."

I said, "It is the magic of literature," and before he could say anything, I said, "Would you like me to read out the whole story? Then I am willing to let you be the judge—not the

magistrate but you! You give me any punishment that you like—but *after* hearing the *whole* story. It will take but one hour—and we can ask for that much postponement.”

“*Achcha!*” The Sardarji said, reasonably, “but don’t try any tricks with me.”

So we—I, my friend Sri Krishen Das, the old Sardarji and two of his younger companions—went to my residence after obtaining two hours’ postponement of the case which would now come up after lunch.

After serving tea to my guests (the Sardarji swallowed one little pill of Ephedrine with that), I started reading the story—and even if I say so, I read it as I had never read it before—better than in the dugout in Kashmir.

After all, my whole life, my reputation as a responsible and purposeful writer, was at stake. When I began, and the prejudiced anti-Sikh inventives were pronounced, I could feel the old man whine under the ferocity of expression. But he had grit his teeth. As the story proceeded, he seemed to thaw, and when I finished it, he had melted and tears were flowing down his snow-white beard. I folded the magazine and put it at the feet of the old man.

“Now I am ready for my punishment,” I said, somewhat melodramatically, “If you want, you may take out your *kripan* and sever my head.”

“Your punishment is—your punishment is—” the Sardarji stood up, and embraced me and actually kissed my hand, “—this—and this—and this! I will tell the court I was mistaken in my complaint! I will withdraw it at once. You wrote the story, and we might have killed you!” And again he embraced me and I could feel the wetness of his tears on his beard.

Even after the Jhansi Sardarji’s evidence, it took the court a whole week to come to a legalistic decision. But the backbone of the case was broken. And the Sardarji parted from me with the final injunction, “Always serve your mother, son. Keep with you an extra packet of Ephedrine!”

The final vindication came a few years later.

Sardar Khushwant Singh translated and edited a book of Punjabi short stories in which he included an English rendering

of my *Sardarji*—under the new title, *The Death of Shaikh Burhanuddin*. Khushwant presumably felt that no book of Punjabi stories would be complete without this controversial story which was written primarily in Urdu!

33. Communism and I

One of the persistent legends in Indian politics is that I am a communist, or at least a hidden-communist, a fellow traveller or a stooge of the communists. All kinds of people seem to believe it—except the communists who think I am an un-regenerated “petite bourgeoisie!”

On the other hand, Gene Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, two American research scholars who came to India and presumably stayed here for several years financed by a Ford Foundation grant and sponsored by the California University, Berkeley, to do research on “Communism in India” and wrote a 600-page book of that name,¹ have come to the following conclusion about a personality named Khwaja Ahmad Abbas:

More interesting than Karanjia, however, is K.A. Abbas, journalist, author and film scenarist, who associated with many Communist groups for years. Abbas describes himself as a non-Communist, yet there is no doubt that he tries to play a role not only in determining CPI policy, but in influencing the international Communist movement as well.

Don't laugh, please!

The two American scholars are evidently well-informed about the communist movement in India, they have quoted from papers and magazines, written many years ago and since forgotten. For instance, they have given a lengthy extract (I suppose, correctly—I have no copy of the article to compare!) from a critical article I wrote in the *China Monthly* of Shanghai on the conclusion of my China visit, at the end of the

¹*Communism in India* by Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, published by the University of California, USA and the Perennial Press, Bombay, India.

tour of our delegation, which was published by the American publisher to prove that the then regime in China welcomed friendly criticism by foreign friends as well as self-criticism by local patriots.

But there is one lacuna in their research. They have completely ignored a "case" that was "filed" against me by the CPI literary stalwarts in 1948 and 1949, all over India, as a result of which I, a supposedly "international adviser" and "expert" on communism in India and elsewhere, was expelled even from the Progressive Writers' Association and the Indian People's Theatre Association after being one of the three editors of the PWA journal, *Naya Adab*, and being founder and General Secretary of the IPTA for several years.

In October to November 1948, two cases were "filed" against me. Both were on charges of writing objectionable matter.

One was "filed" by the bureaucrats of U.P. for a story called *Sardarji*. The story of that story has been told, and need not be repeated.

The other was "filed" by my communist friends for writing the preface to Ramanand Sagar's humanist novel *Aur Insan Mar Gaya* (And Man Died!) about the partition riots and the inhumanity they engendered.

I was at last exonerated in the Allahabad Court and honourably discharged, as detailed in the last chapter.

But I was held guilty by the progressive writers and was practically expelled from the organization for writing the "anti-people" preface.

I was not only expelled, but to maintain any kind of literary (and otherwise) contacts with me was frowned upon. The Telugu editor of a communist journal was turned out of the Party for printing a translation of one of my stories. Later on he became a famous and successful film producer and told me the story of how I was responsible for his transition from politics to film production. Krishenchander was reprimanded for contributing his novel of Kashmir *Toofan ki Kaliyan* to *Sargam*, a Hindi magazine which I had started to popularize Urdu literature through the Devanagari script.

The story of the novel and the preface may be briefly summarized.

I had heard extracts from the novel which was being written by Ramanand Sagar in the end of 1947, and had expressed my willingness to contribute a preface to it. While writing the preface, I felt it was not enough to praise it, but to discuss the human—and inhuman—issues involved in the incidents described therein.

The question that I raised was that, granted that imperialism accentuated (or even created) the schism between Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs, but our behaviour during the riots and mutual massacres, in India and Pakistan, was *our* responsibility for which *we* Indians in India and Pakistanis in Pakistan, must search our collective hearts and souls. The primordial beast in man was not tamed enough, if we behaved, or connived at the behaviour of whole communities, like barbarians. There was nothing anti-revolutionary about it—nor did it imply the exoneration of the many crimes of imperialism and Indian feudalism-capitalism to create and perpetuate these animosities. Nor was there anything anti-communist about it. Indeed, I had held all parties—the Congress, the Muslim League, the Sikh organizations, the socialists *and the communists*—squarely responsible for failing to humanize the Indian political animal. I asked for a scientific psychological probe into the behaviour of Indians and Pakistanis during the riots where the incidents of humanity and compassion were submerged in the general flood of violence, bloodshed, and degrading intercommunal animus.

I must also mention here that, by this time, the brief honeymoon of the communists with the Congress was over. Freedom was now held an illusion, and the Congress government (particularly in the states) were out to crush the Communist Party of India. The communist line had correspondingly hardened, and the “in-betweeners” like us got the worst of it—from both sides, of course.

A literary inquisition found my preface objectionable, Communist Party literary “cell” meetings were followed by the Progressive Writers’ meetings (while I was fighting out the *Sardarji* case in Allahabad) and I was roundly denounced by my ex-comrades and colleagues. This explained the comparative silence, and alienation, of my communist friends from the defence committees set up by the writers (mostly of Hindi) to support me—a phenomenon that was not, at that time, understood by

me or understandable to me.

When I came to Bombay and learnt of all that had been spoken and written against me, and my preface, I wrote a massive rejoinder in the form of an article in Urdu entitled "*Yeh Barbariyat Kyon?*" (Why This Barbarism?) It was intended to be published in *Naya Adab*, the periodical of the Progressive Writers' Association (which had published the original preface along with criticism of it from my quarters) of which I was not only co-editor (along with Sardar Jafri and Krishenchander) but also its declared printer and publisher. Sardar Jafri was then in jail, and Krishenchander had reservations about my article. Meanwhile the Party literary commission decided to stop the magazine, mainly that my article may not be published in it. This must be a unique event in the annals of journalism when an editor found himself banned from his own paper—not by governmental authorities but by his own co-editors or at least their ideological "dictators."

So, I decided to read it out at a meeting of the progressive writers called to discuss my preface and my insistence on publishing this article. There, in a hostile atmosphere, I read aloud the article. It began with a few provocative quotations from Sardar Jafri and Krishenchander and even (heresy of heresies) Karl Marx.

The quotation from Krishenchander was the bare title of his book, *Hum Wahshi Hain* (We are Barbarians), a collection of stories, each of which was written in words of fire, highlighting with delicacy and subtlety the few human and many inhuman incidents of the riots. The stories represented the conscience of the progressive writers at its noblest and had been widely praised by the communist press when written and published in the heat of the moment of violence, in late 1946 and early 1947.

The second quotation was from Sardar Jafri's preface to it—the collection of stories—in which he had said:

But can we blame only the English imperialists, bureaucrats, the feudal rulers, and the communalists among the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, and thus appease our progressive conscience and civilized mind?—We shall have to assess and probe our own actions also.

Then I gave three quotations from my bitterest critics—none of them is a well-known writer today. They had accused me of bending my knee before the “gods of darkness” (the Congress rulers) by writing the preface.

Another had ridiculed my use of the “party of humanity” to which, I said, the author Ramanand Sagar belonged, and asked me directly when such a party had come into being.

Yet another had accused me of being *anti-people*.

Balraj Sahni, a film star and a friend of mine had accused me of doing dirty propaganda against India—like the film *India Speaks*—an anti-India documentary which had been exposed and attacked in my “Last Page!”

Another had accused me being pro-Nazi, pro-imperialist and anti-people.

In short, in the words of a critic from Ferozepur, from a “friend of the people” I had become an “enemy of the people.”

On a personal level, I was very much hurt by the association of Sardar Jafri (whom I knew as a humanist and an understanding friend) with my accusers and inquisitors. So, in retaliation, I pointedly quoted his words from the preface of *Hum Wahshi Hain*:

... It seems that centuries-old barbarism of Man has awakened, Man has discarded, like the snake-skin, the civilized and cultured restraints. . . The Beast who, thousands of years ago, lived in the cave of the mountains, and in the hollows of tree trunks, is striding along the civilized world, baring his bloody teeth and claws.”

Read in the light of today, all this seems like a dream—or to be more exact, a nightmare. Or like a sadistic mockery of a schoolboy debate—except that here too vital issues of life—and death—were involved! I am referring to it not to probe old wounds but to raise a point which is of significant relevance even today.

All our political parties—communalist, nationalist, socialist and communists and all trade unionists—are equally to blame. They had, by their propaganda, made their respective adherents aggressive partisans of this or that ideology, but they have completely neglected the cultural education, the humanization,

of their followers.

There is a hiatus between the dynamic activities of the Indian political being and his cultural upbringing, for none of the parties has been propagating the values of rationalism, culture, humanism and compassion.

For thirty years or more, this has been the recurring theme of my "Last Pages"—the "culturalization" and humanization of the Indian working class—but alas, to no avail! Thus we have so-called followers of Mahatma Gandhi practicing black magic, the Marxist communists (for instance in Bombay) spending hundreds of rupees on slaughtering beef cattle on the occasion of *Baqr Id*, but keeping their women imprisoned in purdah, (where they contract TB of the lungs). There is no wonder that, after seventy years of the Congress, and fifty years of communism, the Indian proletariat is an susceptible to ideologies like the RSS and the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, and that ritualistic murders are still practised in certain areas.

During the riots in Bombay, the Hindu workers of a mill (dominated by a communist trade union) refused to work with their Muslim co-workers. Compromise with the people's religious, anti-secular prejudices is easier than to teach them the elements of secularism, humanism and rationalism. This is common to both the Congress and the communists.

Many years ago, a friend of mine (incidentally a communist) went to a backward rural area of Bengal to start a branch of the People's Theatre there. The people were so steeped in apathy—both cultural and physical—as to be indifferent to his plans for a cultural renaissance.

Till one day, sitting in the village *chaupal*, he started first humming, then singing, the poetry of Tagore. The peasants were aroused and interested at last, and asked for more and more—till the night had passed and it was dawn. Then he saw an old man in tears and asked him for the reason.

"Son, I have just realized that I might have died in a few years time, and not known that in our country such beauty exists as revealed in these poems you recited."

That is the crux of the dispute between the communists and I.

The communists would like to turn the entire proletariat (subject to variations of the existing Party line or lines) militant

and aggressive—I would like to tame both their militancy and their aggression with the poetry of Tagore, the verses of Iqbal, the prose of Premchand, Ismat Chughtai, and Krishenchander, the humanist philosophy of poets like Kabir and Sardar Jafri (whom I regard today as the modern *avatar* of Sant Kabir).

To go back to Sardar Jafri in 1949, he was arrested and detained in prison. I and Mulk Raj Anand (another petit bourgeoisie renegade like me) went in a deputation to Morarji Desai, then the Home Minister. He threatened to put us also both behind bars for being crypto communists, which did not frighten us. In fact we would have been glad to join Sardar Jafri and other comrades in jail and to pursue and continue our debates and controversies behind bars.

Soon after, I happened to meet Jawaharlal Nehru in Delhi.

He told me that Morarji Desai was convinced I was a communist.

I said, "Panditji, what do you think?"

He said, "Since you say you are not a communist, I believe you. I have known many communists in my life—and I am aware of their many failings—they are opinionated and headstrong, but I have never found them ashamed or afraid of declaring their communism. Since you say you are *not* a communist, for me you are not a communist."

And I told him my little story about there being three kind of communists each worse than the other. The communists are *bad*, the ex-communists are *worse*, and the anti-communists are the *worst* kind of "communists." And Jawaharlal Nehru uninhibitedly laughed.

Despite the practical expulsion, I continued to work in the several "united front" organizations (called "front" organizations by anti-communists) like the peace movement and the People's Theatre. Why this fascination for working with the communists?

Frankly, I liked working with them for common, progressive programmes—like the IPTA, the PWA and for peace and friendship with communist countries. I think the communists are sincere, single-minded (alas, I, a Geminian, am not!), devoted to the cause of people's revolution. They are *objective* (which I am not) to the point of utter ruthlessness. Also I find

in them humanity and (except during abnormal periods of fanaticism or sectarianism) even a sense of humour—particularly the communists I have known like P.C. Joshi, Sajjad Zaheer, Mehmoduz Zafar, Sibtay Hasan and Sardar Jafri (the last-named has been without a Party card for years).

But then why do I not join the Communist Party? Because I am not prepared to sell my intelligence and my conscience to the so-called collective wisdom of the Party (which might be the individual idiosyncrasy or cruel whims of a Stalin or a B.T. Ranadive, both of whom have done more harm than good to the communists cause), or take diktats from a “cell” or a group of opinionated or fanatical upstarts, as happened during my *Aur Insaan Mar Gaya* preface inquisition.

I believe myself to be a Marxist—though I believe that Marxist methods be applied to the tenets of Marxism itself. (“Thank God I am not a Marxist,” said Karl Marx).

I believe in science more than Marxism—and believe that, like all sciences, Marxism also should be periodically reassessed and (where necessary) *revised*. In that sense I am all for revisionism while the average communist believes in the dogma of Marxism as the “final and absolute truth.”

That is, in a way, a religious attitude. The Pope, too, is against *revisionism* in the dogma of the Catholic church! But, like the people of other religions, I differ with communists and find it possible to work with them. I don’t hate Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians—or dogmatic communists!

(And, according to anti-communists who are, I said, the worst kind of communists), I am as bad as a communist!

Ten years later, when the Communist Party line had taken another somersault, and we had managed to bring *Bannay Bhai* (Sajjad Zaheer) out of Pakistan, he (the gentle and integrated soul) convened a meeting of progressive writers in Bombay. I was invited to Ismat Chughtai’s place for this meeting. There I was accosted by several of my ex-accusers, who profusely apologized for their “personal rudeness” in the past. It was rather like a well-drilled performance. They had been told to apologize to me and they were doing it! I rather pitied them and told them that there was nothing “personal.” They were bound by a discipline, while I was not bound.

At that meeting, imagine my surprise when of all people I—an ex-traitor who had been expelled—was voted to preside over the meeting.

Nine years later, Sardar Jafri started his Urdu quarterly, *Guftagu*. He wanted me to contribute—and I made a stipulation that my first contribution would be the same *Yeh Barbariyat Kyon?* for I not only felt the nineteen-year old discussion was incomplete, but I believed that the issues I had raised were still alive and very much relevant. He had the good sense and good grace enough to publish it, along with a lengthy editorial note in which he said that it was my democratic right to insist on its publication.

To go back to 1949-50, while out of the PWA and the IPTA. I continued to take active interest in the other “front” organizations (which were really the “united front organizations” of communists and non-communist progressives).

Among them there was the FSU (Friends of the Soviet Union)—soon to be re-named Indo-Soviet Cultural Society or ISCUS, for short. The other was ICFA—the India China Friendship Association!—of which, probably, I was at that time the vice-president of the Bombay branch.

And that last association led me to an adventurous journey and my clairvoyant uncle to make a strange prophecy.

34. A Moment in Peking

My father-in-law, who was also my uncle and whom we all affectionately called "Mamoojaan" was, in many ways, a remarkable man. During his yogistic wanderings he had acquired (or developed) his psychic senses so that, if he was in the Soviet Union, he would have been taken to the Academy of Sciences and there subjected to research on extrasensory perception. He had a way of "seeing" things—vividly enough, but as the things would be "seen" or "foreseen" only in his mind's eye (while waking or sleeping) he could only describe them.

For instance, in early August 1949 he told me that he saw me standing in a great square which I first mistook to be the Red Square in Moscow, but when he described the parade of "little yellow men," I thought of the T'ien An Min Square in Peking. It was my ambition to go to both these countries—so I didn't mind either, and plied my uncle to see and describe the things he saw in greater detail. He "saw" a great many flags and men and women dancers and a lot of drums, dancing in the streets, a sort of jubilant celebration. In the end of August the mystery was revealed when, on behalf of the India-China Friendship Association, I was selected as a member of the first goodwill delegation which was being invited to Peking for the First of October celebration commemorating the second anniversary of the Chinese Revolution.

I was excited about it as, for a journalist and a writer, it was a rare opportunity not to be missed. So I set about the business of preparing my passport, which had expired quite a long time ago. I applied for renewal of the passport and was glad to learn that the document was ready. It was a brand new one with the insignia of the Republic, describing me as an "Indian citizen" instead of the hated old one issued in 1946, describing me as a "British subject by birth." There was a fortnight to

go. We must be in Canton by 22 September as there were no air services then operating in China, and so we were expected to go north by the Canton-Peking Express, which would take at least five or six days.

I had to get the document endorsed for travel to China and thought it would be simple. I went to the Passport Office which was then across the road from where I lived with my cousin, Saiyidain, as I had lost my flat in Shivaji Park.

I went to the Passport Office, submitted my passport, and was told to come again on the day after tomorrow.

The very next day, I received an official-looking long khaki envelope and marvelled at the prompt response of the Passport Office, as I thought inside would be an official slip asking me to collect my passport. Instead, there was a letter, informing me with "*great pleasure*" that the Government of Bombay had decided to cancel my passport, as I was not regarded as "a desirable" person to travel abroad.

I knew the hand behind it—that of Shri Morarji Desai, then Home Minister of Bombay. We have never been the best of friends, and so I was not going to appeal to him.

I informed Pandit Sunderlal, the leader of the delegation, and the Chinese embassy, of my inability to join the delegation and the reason why.

On the day the Bombay members of the delegation—including my friend R.K. Karanjia—flew to New Delhi to catch a plane to Hong Kong, to take the train to Canton from there, I went to the airport to see them off and returned with a sense of having missed the bus.

Before night the Chinese embassy telephoned me from Delhi to let them know whenever I might hear about my passport. When I told my uncle about it, he said he still "saw" me in the same square standing beside R.K. Karanjia.

And so, as a last attempt, a long telegram went from me to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru protesting against the arbitrary cancellation of the passport and seeking his intervention. I put a challenging sting in the telegram: "If you also say I should not take this opportunity to go to China, I will not."

Three days later came a wire from New Delhi from the P.M.'s secretary asking me to "contact the Passport Office."

I hastily ran across the Oval Maidan to the Passport Office

in the old Secretariat, and there the document, duly endorsed for China, was handed over to me.

Overjoyed, I came home and trunkcalled the Chinese embassy in New Delhi and told them the good news. They said I should make preparations to leave Bombay by the evening or night plane and, meanwhile, stand by for further instructions.

The instructions came within three hours—I was to catch the next day's Pan American plane from New Delhi and so must reach New Delhi by the morning. I asked that now only a day's margin would remain with me when I reached Canton, how would I reach Peking in time for celebrations? They said I was not to worry. The Government of China had invited me to come and would make all the necessary arrangements for me to reach Peking before the celebrations began.

That night's airmail plane carried me to Delhi. It was via Nagpur. This was a brain wave of Rafi Ahmed Kidwai who had been shifted to the Communications Ministry. With four old Dakotas he launched an all-India airmail service linking up Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The planes converged on Nagpur—approximately the geographical centre of India—and there exchanged their mail bags and each plane returned to where it had started from.

Before leaving Bombay, I had already sent a telegram to Pandit Nehru's secretary seeking an appointment any time in the evening and when I reached Delhi and telephoned the secretary, he told me that P.M. had given me fifteen minutes that evening at 6 p.m. Then I rang up the Chinese embassy and was invited by them to take tea with the ambassador the same afternoon. My plane was supposed to take off at about 9 p.m. and so, I should be at the airport by 8 p.m.

For me, on this trip, China began in the Jind House, once belonging to the maharaja whose sole claim to fame was that his dogs lived in luxurious velvet-lined kennels, while his subjects starved in huts and hovels. When I called there, the whole place was in a state of creative turmoil as it was being decorated for the great celebration of the anniversary of the Revolution on 1 October. What struck me immediately, however, were the superlatively beautiful decorations—the precious antique porcelain vases, the blackwood screens and lanterns, the tapestries and scrolls and dainty water colours—all of which

proclaimed that the new revolutionary regime had not turned its back on the great artistic and cultural traditions of China and that they had every intention of preserving all that is beautiful and artistic in their cultural heritage. (The austerity and the vandalism of the Cultural Revolution was still in the womb of the future!)

In the course of the thirty-minute interview with General Yuan-hsien, the Chinese ambassador told me (through an interpreter) that his government was doing everything possible not only to preserve and to foster the classical arts and crafts, but to make them available to the vast mass of the common people.

The polite bow, the modest expression, the lavish hospitality, the ritual of offering sweets and cakes along with fragrant jasmine tea (of which I had six cups while talking with the ambassador)—all those attractive features of old Chinese culture were still observed. In the Chinese embassy, you found none of the brusqueness and harshness and aggressive self-assertion that are regarded (even by some callow communists) as hall-marks of Marxism.

In true Chinese tradition, whatever General Yuan said was marked by civilized and modest understatement. For instance he forewarned me at the conclusion of my interview, "Mr Abbas, when you go to China, please do not expect too much. We have had very little time to change things—we had eight years of war with Japan, and three years of war with Chiang—but in the last two years we have achieved a little progress—and we will progress more and more, for we are sure we are on the right road!"

The fifteen minutes extended to half an hour while Jawaharlal Nehru talked to me of India's traditional and modern contacts with China. While much of what he talked to me was by way of an informal "briefing"—in response to my request for any suggestions for the angle of observation, the line of enquiry, one must pursue in China—but I came away from the Prime Minister with two predominant impressions:

- (1) That he was surprisingly well-informed about China and its *dramatis personae*, and

(2) That he was keenly and sympathetically interested in the great revolutionary experiment that was being carried out in the Chinese society by the new regime.

At that time, it was my impression that our delegation would start a historical process of bringing the two giants of Asia—China and India—together. Mao's China and Nehru's India, while retaining their respective ideologies, would appear to be moving towards a genuine mutual understanding—even if ten years later, I would have reason to be cruelly disillusioned.

To add to the irony of it all, it was an American airline—the Pan American—that helped me to reach China, though the American plane did its best to delay my departure from Delhi—and arrival in Hong Kong—by at least seven hours!

My friend, Inder Raj Anand, who has recently been to Hong Kong for a few weeks, tells me that the island, though technically a British Crown Colony, is virtually ruled by China. I had this impression over a quarter century ago, as on landing from the Pan American plane (which had arrived in Hong Kong too late in the afternoon of 29 September, instead of in the early hours of the morning, when the single train to the Chinese Frontier leaves to connect with the Canton train). The moment the plane landed, a British police officer came on board, made an announcement for a passenger called "K.A. Abbas." Used to the authoritarian ways of the British police officers in India, I was prepared to be apprehended and prevented from proceeding to China. The American and the British press was manifestly anti-Chinese, and still hoping to restore their favourite, Chiang Kai-shek, to the throne of Peking. But soon I was to find out the power and authority of the Government of Red China. I was called out to be the first to disembark, while all my fellow passengers (mostly Americans) waited fretfully in the heat of the Hong Kong afternoon and wondered whether I was a VIP or a "wanted by the police" international crook. When I landed and set foot on the "good earth" of China, I was met by a Chinese young man who, speaking excellent English, said he had come to receive me, and asked for my baggage tags and pointed to a car which he had parked right inside the barrier. Within a couple of minutes, before even half the passengers

had disembarked, my baggage had been cleared by the Customs and put in the dickey of the car, and my Chinese friend was driving me, at a reckless speed, through the labyrinthine roads and alleys of Hong Kong.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the border!"

"But the morning train must be gone long time ago."

"There are trains—and trains!"

For the next hour and a half he drove, with rare concentration, through the traffic jams of Hong Kong, often (I noticed) breaking the red lights, whispering something to the policemen on points duty, and getting instant clearance.

"What did you tell that policeman?" I asked him when he had done it that more than once.

"I told him this is a guest of the Government of China and I have to reach him before the border closes."

After traversing the city we were in the hills that stand between British Hong Kong and China. After taking a series of hairpin bends, the border could at last be seen ahead, and (much to my frustration) the barrier was being lowered and there was a click-click just as the car stopped with screeching of brakes.

The sentry—he was an Indian, a Sikh, I was sorry to see he still served the British interests in Hong Kong—and he told us that the barrier on his side was automatically locked and could be opened only by a key which was kept by the commander of the British garrison.

"Where does he live?"

My Chinese friend asked me to ask the policeman. I translated the question and the sentry pointed to a narrow road, "At the end of that road."

It was a replica of a British country cottage, ten thousand miles away, set on the soil of China. The Chinese journalist got the commander to come out in his undervest and shorts, holding a glass of whisky and soda in his hand. "The Chinese government's guest" worked like an open sesame to which the journalist added that a special train was standing by at the border to take me to Canton from where I would be flown to Peking the next morning.

So the major (or colonel?) relented enough to come with us;

he came in his own jeep, and brought the key with him, and clicked the border open. The barrier went up and, after thanking him, we went ahead—I, out of excitement, a few steps ahead of my companion. When we crossed the railway bridge, from the Chinese side there was a curt order, the Chinese equivalent of "Halt! Who goes there?" A young Chinese soldier, who looked to be a mere boy, had his bayoneted rifle almost touching my chest. From behind came my companion's voice saying something in Chinese, the gun was withdrawn, and instead a bouquet was forced into my hands—by the same soldier who was backed by other soldiers.

The whole atmosphere changed in a second. Instead of hostility there was effusive hospitality. The commander of the border garrison came, also looking like a boy, and apologized for the soldier's behaviour. He explained (which was translated to me by a new interpreter who had come from Canton and had been waiting for me the whole day) that I looked a little like Chiang Kai-shek and the soldier thought that Chiang was trying to sneak in. We had a laugh over it, but in the pit of my stomach was the feeling of being bayoneted in that misunderstanding. In my life, people had told me I looked like this person and that. For instance, in Bombay many people had told me that I looked like Dr Baliga. But this resemblance to Chiang was a new one to me and certainly most unwelcome and certainly dangerous.

The journalist from Hong Kong shook hands with me and went back across the border to drive to the gay and crowded city that I had last seen in 1938 during my world tour. He handed me over to another comrade who was the first Chinese official I saw in the blue uniform of trousers and buttoned-up Jodhpur style coat which seemed to be the national dress of New China. He took me to the solitary carriage attached to half a dozen goods bogeys for ballast and assured me that my bed was ready on the berth and that I could sleep in peace. My hosts, however, had a problem, for I declined to eat the pork that was prepared for me. But the station master was most resourceful and kindly telephoned the next station to have some chicken and rice cooked for me. Within five minutes of our arrival the special train had clattered away and I sat by the window though it was a dark night and I could not see the

landscape we were passing through.

At the next station the train halted and the station master appeared with bowls of rice and pieces of cooked chicken which was really delicious—much better than the food served in Bombay's "Chinese" restaurants. From then onwards the train went thundering by other stations, and would not stop anywhere.

The two of us—the interpreter from Canton and I, each had a coupe to himself—wrapped ourselves in blankets and went to sleep. The previous night the plane had arrived from Karachi seven hours late and the pink of dawn was already visible on the horizon as we took off from Delhi, and I had a sleepless day in the plane.

I was wakened by the rumble of the train changing many tracks. It was still dark but we had arrived at Canton railway station. The train was unheralded by any intimation and so we were presumed to be unauthorized interlopers who had managed to commandeer a train from somewhere. The moment it stopped, a whole battalion of young-looking soldiers converged on the solitary compartment occupied by one Chinese and one foreigner—itsself mighty suspicious. We were escorted to the waitingroom, where lengthy explanations were given and received by the army men who at last relaxed and smiled. Then the Cantonese young man who had come to receive me at the border went about telephoning, and at last arrived to make the explanations to me. The train was supposed to arrive two hours later but the engine driver had made it in record time and so the reception committee that was supposed to meet us was scheduled to arrive much later. But they had been informed of our arrival and so they would be there soon. I was to be met by all the civil officials including the mayor of Canton who had come to receive our entire delegation. To the Chinese whether it was the whole delegation or a single member who had been left behind made no difference. I would have to go through the whole and elaborate welcoming ceremony.

Soon the reception committee arrived along with children carrying bouquets. I rather sympathized with the youngsters who had to be pulled out of their beds to offer flowers to a foreigner of whom they had never heard. But discipline was

discipline—and, here at least it was a smiling discipline. The reception was over, I and my baggage were bundled in a car which raced through the empty streets to a hotel where I got the strangest and the most elaborate reception.

The hotel room had old and ornate but comfortable furniture. The table was loaded with three pots of hot tea—Chinese jasmine tea, Indian tea with a pot of hot milk, and Russian tea with slices of lemon in a plate. A napkin covered the hot toast, with butter and marmalade kept separately. There were Chinese cakes, and pastry, too. There was chicken and rice in case I was hungry and needed more substantial refreshments. All piping hot! So was the water in the bath tub, with soap, tooth paste, and tooth brush in cellophane coverings. There were shaving things too—a brand new razor, with new blades, a brush with a tube of shaving soap. All made in China! There was a pair of slippers, sealed in cellophane, and a kimono, likewise sealed, was lying on bed, the covers of which were invitingly upturned. In short, everything was done to make me comfortable and cosy for the two hours that was all that I would need to rest and refresh myself before embarking on my plane journey to Peking. I didn't have to open my suitcase at all.

I thanked my hosts and they departed leaving me to nibble at a toast and drink a cup of Indian tea and then lay down on bed for an hour, too tired and excited for any sleep. At half past five I got up, shaved, then soaked myself in hot water rubbed myself with towels, dressed and was ready when my hosts, the whole lot of them, arrived punctually at six, to take me to the airport.

I was already convinced of the thorough efficiency and considerate hospitality of the new regime of China.

The military plane was Russian—a twenty-seater—and flew low over the green landscape—the “good earth” of China. We were privileged to fly to Peking, for there was no passenger service by air! I was one of the two passengers—the other one was a delegate from some East European country, also a straggler like me. Since neither of us knew any common language, we only smiled at each other. In any case, I dozed all the way to Peking—except for the brief stopovers for “re-fuelling” the plane and also the two passengers and the crew of two who

were very good pilots—Russian-trained, of course!

Peking was a lovely sight from the air—the whole panorama of Chinese history and culture seemed to be bathed in the light of the settling sun, with the Great Wall, dimly visible far to the north. But when I got out of the plane, it was really cold, even at the end of September. More bouquets, more handshakes, and all the fuss that was made for fraternal guests, whether they were two or twenty! At last, overloaded with bouquets, we were made to sit in limousines—they were Russian Zims—but I noticed very little vehicular traffic on the streets. I reached the Peking Hotel to find my whole delegation had already left for the eve-of-the-anniversary banquet that Chairman Mao Tse-tung was giving to all the guests. I was asked to take my time to bathe and dress for the occasion. My seat was already reserved for me, and the invitation card was on my table.

The banquet was a magnificent affair—not only because of the ornate settings of the several halls which were filled by the members of the government, including the legendary figures of Mao Tse-tung, Chu Teh and Chou En-lai, the diplomats of the Soviet Union and other friendly countries including the bearded Indian, Dr Pannikar, but also by hundreds of representatives of Chinese peasantry, Labour and the intellectuals. We were all presented to Chairman Mao Tse-tung who sat with his colleagues on the head table, and I got a peculiar thrill in shaking hands with his extremely soft and well-padded palms. I had a feeling that I was shaking hands with history.

I met all my colleagues of our delegation—Pandit Sunderlal, the Gandhian socialist and a full-throated friend of China, Dr V.K.R.V. Rao, the economist, already a M.P., who would later become a minister, Dr Mulk Raj Anand, the novelist and the doyen of Indian progressive intellectuals, Russey Karanjia, the *Blitz* editor, and G.P. Huthesing who had reservations about almost everything done or shown by the new regime. Also, of course, others—who included Marxists and Gandhians in about equal measure, but no Communist Party members!

Also present in the hall and given a place of honour beside Mao Tse-tung, while the diplomats were relegated to a gallery—were the men and women moulded in the image of Mao Tse-

tung—the veterans of the Revolution, peasants, workers who had made the great transformation possible. I was most anxious to meet them, for my journalist's sixth sense told me that an interview with Chairman Mao was next to impossible for any journalist, and so one should concentrate on these men and women moulded in the image of Mao Tse-tung.

Next day I saw them all—the knowns and the unknowns—in the mammoth and memorable parade in T'ien An Min square directly in front of the "Gate of Heavenly Peace." History, indeed, seemed to march in step with a million men, women and children of New China who participated in the six-hour long parade to commemorate the second anniversary of the People's Republic. It was here that the Manchu tyrants used to sit on the Peacock Throne to receive tribute from all corners of their far-flung empire. A hundred years ago even the highest in the land, governors and dukes, came trembling when they were summoned to the imperial presence and crawled on their knees through this gate of "heavenly peace!" Today the transition is complete—from the "Sons of Heaven" to the "Sons of the Soil."

Mao and the Chinese people—the leader and the masses—the cause and the effect—today one could see them in this picture of the armed forces and the representatives of the different people's organizations marching past through the square.

Present on the top of the "Gate of Heavenly Peace" which served as a picturesque reviewing stand, besides Mao, were Chu Teh, the almost legendary, leather-faced commander of the Chinese Red Army and Mao's closest colleague for twenty-five years, Madam Sun Yat-sen who linked the contemporary China with the tradition of her illustrious husband; Chou En-lai, the Prime Minister of the Republic, a veteran revolutionary with the elegant and suave manners of a cosmopolite, and other members of the Cabinet, most of them in the simple Sun Yat-sen uniform which almost everyone in China was wearing. But there were a few traditional long gowns, also with patriarchal beards—providing yet another link between the revolutionary present and the classical past.

Lower down, on another reviewing stand were the members of the diplomatic crops (among whom the genial bearded

personality of India's K.M. Pannikar stood out) and the foreign delegations (including the fifteen of us from India led by Pandit Sunderlal) who had been specially invited for the occasion—from USSR, India, Burma, Pakistan, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Hungary, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia.

But there was still a third reviewing stand on which were seated several thousand other honoured guests—the labour heroes, heroines, soldiers and guerillas who distinguished themselves in the war of liberation, and workers and peasants from every corner of China, who had distinguished themselves in the battle of production, specially food production.

Here were old peasant revolutionaries who accompanied Mao Tse-tung on the Long March, youthful guerilla veterans of the war of liberation against Japan, and of the more recent campaign against the Kuomintang armies.

One of the diplomats who was present at the same ceremony the previous year told me that it was a brave and self-confident but a very shabbily-dressed "People's Liberation Army" (commonly known by its initials—PLA) that marched that year before Mao Tse-tung.

Since then, during the last one year, how very much the People's government had been able to achieve, was demonstrated by the smart and even elegant turnout of the PLA in the second anniversary parade.

Exactly at the stroke of ten, the massive seven hundred-piece band burst into a lively marching tune and a contingent of generals and commanders came, dressed in immaculate uniforms with gleaming white gloves marching smartly. These were not the "perfumed tigers" of Kuomintang who used to go to the front with their "mattresses and mistresses." These were the hard-bitten veterans of all the campaign that Mao Tse-tung and Chu Teh fought; these were the officers who transformed the peasant guerillas into efficient and modern soldiers.

The parade was now on, and columns after columns of the army, navy, and air force, guerillas with their traditional towels tied round their heads, came marching with the rhythmic tramp-tramp-tramp of military boots echoing through the square. According to military attaches in the diplomatic corps, the marching was of a very high order and spoke of rigid training and strict discipline.

After the planes—including jet planes, all Russian, had dipped in salute came Mao's real army—the people! Almost as disciplined as the armed forces, all wearing the blue Sun Yat-sen uniform, with flags flying and their own bands playing, there came the people in hundreds of thousands, group representing the federation of labour, different trade unions, students organizations, Communist Party and other political parties (yes, there were other political parties in China through all acknowledging the leadership of the Communist Party!), youth leagues, art academies, teachers, peasants, heroes of labour and farmers, railway workers and workers from film studios, artists, dancers, singers. . . .

It was by no means a procession of dumb driven people. Thousands of students waved bunches of flowers, thousands of student athletes, each carrying a football raised over their heads. China, which had a rich tradition of classical opera had no folk dances, so the communists set to teach the peasants to dance the Yang-Ko (harvest) dances—set to the music and rhythm of traditional harvest songs. Here came tens of thousands peasants, all dancing the Yang-Ko dances.

And the slogans? There were blazoned on the streamers and placards: People of Asia, Unite; We Salute the Korean People, Oppose American Imperialism; Long Live Stalin; Long Live Mao Tse-tung

This last was the slogan which was on the lips of hundreds of thousands of people: Mao Tse-tung *Wan Shoi* (May Mao Tse-tung Live a Thousand Years). Was it the disciplined expression of the gratitude of the people, or a new cult of personality?

Altogether, it was a spectacle, at once inspiring and formidable, embodying a great hope and a great challenge. At that moment we felt shaken as if by an earthquake. The "good earth" of China has been shaken and upturned.

35. Thanks to Chairman Mao Tse-tung

Russy Karanjia and I began our series of interviews with Madame Sun Yat-sen, the widow of the maker of modern China, and the sister of Madame Chiang Kai-shek. She proved to be gracious and charming, remarkably well-preserved and immaculately, even elegantly, dressed. She was then the vice-chairman of the People's Government of China and she received us with a friendly smile when I and Russy Karanjia called at her residence.

India, she said at the outset, has always had a special place in her thoughts. She spoke feelingly about the death of Gandhiji and about the late Mrs Sarojini Naidu. She recalled with regret that when Jawaharlal paid a brief visit to Chungking in war-time, she was away from the war-time capital.

She gratefully acknowledged the humanitarian services of the Indian medical mission that Nehru had sent to China during the war and she was obviously moved when she mentioned the martyrdom of Dwarkanath Kotnis, the Indian doctor who laid down his life for China.

This was the prelude to her statement that Indian-Chinese friendship should be the cornerstone of Asian unity and Asian peace. "The mighty voice of the Chinese people, along with those of the masses of the Indian people and the peace-loving democratic peoples of the world" would checkmate the wild ravings of savage imperialists. This was the time when the Americans were loudly demanding the encirclement and economic and military strangling of the People's Republic of China. (A far cry from the present phase of Kissinger's kow-towing trips to Peking!)

The second interview (which was a reception cum interview) was with Prime Minister Chou En-lai. All the delegations were invited and Chou En-lai himself received us at the gate of the reception hall. We were led into a dining hall and asked

to be seated wherever we liked. It was a more business-like session. Chou En-lai welcomed us to his country, hoped that we had been able to see what we wanted to see. Naturally, there were more shortcomings, he said with characteristic Chinese modesty, but the People's Republic of China was only two years old. If there were some things which the guests would like to be clarified or elaborated he was there at their service. As the speech was being translated for our benefit into English, then into Russian, we had an opportunity to observe Chou En-lai, relaxing, waiting for the translations to be over. To observe him and to compare him with our own Nehru! Like Jawaharlal, Chou En-lai, too, was handsome, elegant and well-dressed, smiling and soft-spoken. He was educated in France, and knew both French and English, French a little better than English, but that evening he never spoke a word of any foreign language and the whole dialogue was with the help of interpreters.

G.P. Hutheesing, of our delegation, and a representative of the Press Trust of India, who was less enthusiastic about China, had sent him in advance a whole series of questions, most of them about Korea, with an eye on the American press. He asked him about the Government of China's attitude to peace. Chou En-lai replied with due deference to the questioner. "You have raised an excellent question," he began and then quoted Chairman Mao Tse-tung who said on the day the People's Republic was established that China was willing to establish diplomatic relations with any foreign government which was willing to adhere to the principle of equality, mutual benefit and mutual respect for each other's territory and sovereignty. He categorically affirmed that all countries in the world "whether they are socialists, people's democracies, or capitalists" can co-exist peacefully.

Another question from our delegation suggested that China should call an Asian conference to develop friendship among the Asian nations. Chou En-lai replied, "We believe that the people of China, India, Burma, Indonesia and Pakistan, including the Japanese people (the sequence of names was significant!—K.A.A.), will certainly contribute to the unity of the people of the world and by no means be a hindrance to it."

Another delegate asked how long it would take to transform

the multiclass structure of Chinese society into a socialist state. Chou denied the implication that the Chinese economy was a mixed economy. "The future of China's economic development will be state ownership of industry and the socialization of agriculture." That will take, he said, some considerable time. It was important (in view of the present war-of-words that is going on between China and USSR—K.A.A.) that the Chinese Premier said, "So far as equipment we have received great assistance from the Soviet Union and East Germany and Eastern Europe. . . . We learnt railway administration from the Soviet Union."

At the end of the session—nearly 2 a.m.—the Indonesian delegate threw a bombshell by his question which took the form of an eloquent ten-minute speech in Indonesian which took almost as many minutes to translate. He asked in effect "What is China's policy towards the overseas Chinese? Will these Chinese accept the nationality of the country in which they live or will they be the means of Chinese expansionism in Asia?" We could see the colour rising on the cheeks of Chou, but he was too polite for his irritation to be too evident. His reply was significant, in the light of later developments on India's border. He said, in part, "We shall not defend our ancestors who committed aggression against the Koreans and the Vietnamese peoples. We disavow them. People's China will never be imperialist. Since we oppose aggression we shall never start aggression against others."

The other interviews I had during my stay in China were with the nine veterans of the Revolution. Most memorable was Chang Mama who specially came to see me, though it was difficult for her to walk (and whom I called "Mother China" and described her wrinkled face as "a relief map of years of stress and struggle. The skin dried up and withered, like cracked earth in a season of drought"), was an old woman who had been tortured by the Kuomintang police and then, presumed to be dead, was thrown on a scrap heap of dead bodies from where she was rescued by her young companions and nursed back to life. She told me that Chairman Mao Tse-tung had told her at the banquet—"Previously I was telling you to learn about our country, China. Now I tell you about India and her people—for they are our friends—India and China have a long

history of friendship, but then the imperialists came in between us and we became like strangers—now we make the old friendship new. That's what the Chairman says and that's why when I heard an Indian writer wants to see me I came running."

From Peking, we travelled in a special train which was all full of foreign delegations and went to Mukden. Hangchow, Shanghai (which was entirely changed and proletarianized since 1938 when I had been there and after liberation), and back to Canton which was like a crowded provincial city. What was my impression about the country?

The famous Italian writer and novelist, Alberto Moravia begins his book on China with the following dialogue:

B. : "So you have been to China?"

A. : "Yes, I have been to China."

B. : "What impressed you most in China?"

A. : "The poverty."

B. : "The poverty?"

A. : "Yes, the poverty."

B. : "What impression did their poverty make on you?"¹

Now, Alberto Moravia comes from affluent Italy. He often goes to the United States and travels about in Scandinavia.

So, even in 1967, he found China "poor" and felt relieved because "in the United States there are poor people and there are rich people. The poor people are poor because there are rich people, and the rich people are rich because there are poor people. In China there are only poor people."

For us, from India, with the degradation and squalor, its poverty-ridden slums and *jhonpadpatties* and mud-hut villages, China was *not* poor. It was a prosperous country, with well-fed smiling babies, even in the villages, though there were no bloated plutocrats with their conspicuous consumption, their foreign-imported limousines, their expensive fashions in clothes and living styles.

You can't let loose several hundred foreign guests who don't

¹Alberto Moravia, *The Red Book and the Great Wall*, Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd., 1968.

know the language without interpreters, without schedules of what and whom they are to meet. In that sense ours was a "conducted tour"—but we were not prisoners of our interpreters. There was no slinky secret service trailing us. And to shatter the image of "conducted tour," one day I demanded that I be given a car and an interpreter and allowed to go where I wanted to go.

"Where will you go?" The interpreter politely asked me.

Nowhere—anywhere—everywhere," I replied.

Next morning at dawn we set out in a car—and I offhand pointed to the driver—first left—then right—then left—and so on.

At last we were out of the city—there was frost on the ground, till the sun came out with its welcome warming sunshine. We passed villages, but I didn't stop. When we were about fifty miles from Peking, I asked the driver to make a diversion on a *kacha* road—the road ended in a blind alley. At the end of it I said, "Please stop."

There was a small hut. I said, "We will go in there and talk to the peasant who owns it."

We were welcomed into the peasant's house which was a mud hut, a tiles-on-the-roof affair. Soon the whole family was out and then came the neighbours. But there was a bench in the verandah on which we sat, there was a table lying there on which a white cloth was hurriedly put on in our honour.

"What is the name of this village?"

"Two-Locust-Trees village," came the reply through the interpreter.

"How much land have you got?"

"Seventeen mows (about three acres) of land."

"How many bullocks have you got for ploughing?"

He didn't understand about the bullocks—there is very little livestock in China—they do not drink even cow's milk.

But the owner, a wizened old peasant, pointed to a long-eared donkey.

"One donkey," he said when the interpreter explained that I was asking how he ploughed the land.

"What else have you got?"

He pointed to a fat pig, a cow and several piglets who were all grunting to make their presence felt.

"We have also six chickens," proudly proclaimed the old man.

"Have you always had them?"

"No, Sir. Before the Revolution I was a landless peasant. This land has been given to me by Chairman Mao and the Communist Party of China."

He pointed to a portrait of the Chairman, smiling from the wall, and looking incongruous in the company of old prints of bearded warriors and legendary beauties."

One of the chicken who were feeding in the yard was grasped by the son of the peasant, there was a screeching and then silence, and when the table was laid for us to eat, the chicken was there in a pot of exquisite porcelain. There were porcelain bowls for food and tea, most of which were borrowed from the neighbours.

"Eat, friend from India!" invited our host.

I grabbed a pair of chopsticks and attacked the chicken which had been slaughtered for my sake.

As I was eating, I noticed electric bulbs, wires and switches on the wall.

"Is this village electrified?" I asked.

"Yes," replied the old peasant, switching on the light just to prove his point, "All thanks to Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party."

When we visited a middle school we were invited to put any questions we liked in a general knowledge class that we had happened to interrupt. The boys—mostly from working class families—gave prompt answers to the questions we put to them.

"Who was Shakespeare?"

"A great English dramatist."

"Who is Ilya Ehrenburg?"

"A great Russian writer."

"Who is Einstein?"

"A great scientist who was turned out of Germany by Hitler.

"Who was Confucius?"

"All dogma and ancient philosophy."

"Who is the leader of India?"

"Nehru."

"Why should China and India be friends?"

"Because China wants peace, and India wants peace!"

I wonder, if today, after twenty-four years, the same questions are put to Chinese middle school students, the answers would be something like this:

"Who was Shakespeare?"

"A great English dramatist."

"Who was Ilya Ehrenburg?"

"A Russian revisionist, who thanks to Chairman Mao, is now dead!"

"Who is Einstein?"

"A great scientist who was turned out of Germany by Hitler."

"Who was Jawaharlal Nehru?"

"A reactionary leader of India who tried to invade China and was defeated."

"Should China and India be friends?"

"No. They cannot be, for they are following two different roads."

In 1951, the impression that China produced not only on me but on all the delegation which included quite a few non-communists, even Gandhians, was the Chinese were modest, liberal, tolerant and intelligent revolutionaries who were grateful to the Soviet Union, and who were anxious to befriend India.

What happened between 1951 and 1961? Why did the Chinese become hostile to both the Soviet Union and to India and Nehru who introduced China (through the person of Chou En-lai) to the powers of Asia and the world at Bandung and consistently supported the entry of China in the UNO—even after the border incident or aggression?

Years later, the same question was put to me, behind closed door in the office of one of the leading Russian dailies.

I replied, "You should know better. After all, they are your communist brothers and comrades. We were, after all, just friends!"

"We cannot understand them. What they are doing is certainly not in the book of communism."

"Then where is it?"

"Maybe—in the book of China!"

Two days before we left Shanghai I was approached by J.B. Powell, the editor of *China Monthly Review* for an article. I said I write only if and when I have a guarantee of publication in toto of whatever I have to say. I also said that, my over-all impression of New China was favourable, there were some points on which I held contrary opinions or had mental reservations. He said I was free to write what I felt like and that the Government of China welcomed criticism from friends and well-wishers. So I gave him the article of which now no copy exists except what is reproduced in the book *Communism in India* and so I am reproducing these words from there, hoping I was not misquoted, but I think they represent the impression that was created on me at that time:

The daring experiment of "People's Democracy"—i.e., the working class leading a coalition of different parties, united on a patriotic "Common Programme"—appears to us as far more significant than many people in China seem to imagine. It sets a new pattern of social revolution that is as different from the orthodox concept of revolution as Marxism was different from the eighteenth century liberalism of England. . . . The Chinese people have confounded and disproved the orthodox theorists of revolution who have laid down that peasants, simply because they were peasants, would never be able to be the vanguard of a revolution—a privilege that they reserved for the industrial proletariat, and my implication, for the industrially advanced countries of the West. They have proved that the farmers of Shensi and Hopeh and Hunan, though they may have never handled machinery in a factory, when properly led, can be greater revolutionaries than the highly industrialized workers of England and America.

So I look at China's revolution not only in terms of what it has achieved for China but also in terms of the path it has blazed for other countries, particularly of Asia. The Chinese people have revolutionized not only a vast country but the whole continent of revolutionary thought—they have revolutionized the very concept of revolution!

These wider implications of their revolution, if they will permit me to say so, confer historical privileges as well as

impose historical responsibilities on them. Will they be able, for instance, to expand the concept of "People's Democracy" to the international field—to bring together the various countries professing or practicing different ideologies on a "Common Programme" of peace?

On the negative side, I am supposed to have spoken of "the vicious circle of secrecy—censorship secrecy—and the limitation of personal liberties" in China, of the official indifference to China's cultural traditions, which may have been a gurbled summary of what I said, but I certainly remember having written of the "drab uniformity of the blue trousers and coats that men and women, boys and girls, are wearing in China today." (E & O E—Errors and Omissions Excepted.) The publication of this article certainly was evidence of the liberal latitude given to friendly critics of the regime at that time. But how this article leads Messrs Overstreet and Windmiller to conclude that it makes me a "prime example of the fellow travellers who are by no means the puppets of the Central Committee since the Party cannot ignore them and needs that support, may exert considerable influence upon Communist policy. They may also influence the factional disputes within the Party." (Ahem! If only this were true!!—K.A.A.)

36. The Fool Afoot in Filmland

After returning from my China tour, I found myself at a loose end.

I had already wound up *Sargam*, the Hindi literary-cum-film monthly that I had started three years earlier with a view to popularizing Urdu literature through Devanagari script. I published the leading short story writers of Urdu—Krishenchander, Ismat Chughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi and discovered a brilliant new writer Ramlal, and poets like Firaq Gorakhpuri, and paid them well (according to prevalent rates in Hindi, they were very well paid) and the popularity of the magazine proved an incentive to Hindi publishers of repute to take up Urdu books and transliterate them into Devanagari and they sold bumper editions.

This was my aim that had been fulfilled. Therefore, I was not keen to keep the *Sargam* going—particularly when it was running at a continuous loss and I couldn't keep it going. So I decided to quit with my losses, and handed it over to Kulbhushan, my Hindi assistant editor, to continue it as best as he could. A year later he had to close it down altogether, and took up an administrative job in the Government of India's Hindi publication department.

So, what else was there to do? Write the "Last Page" of *Blitz*. But that took only one day of the week. Moreover, I was beginning to be tired of politics, even disillusioned about "my long love affair"—Nehru—and published a series in *Blitz* called "Jawahar writes to Nehru," giving quotations from his progressive and socialist promises and pledges that, I felt, Nehru had forgotten to implement. What else was there to do? Write film stories, of course! There was a theme of "heredity versus environment" rankling in my brain for a long time and I wrote a story on it and, with the help of my friend, Sathe, transformed it into a screenplay. A real life basis for the story



Abbas with
Prithviraj Kapoor



Abbas with Shahnaz Agha
during outdoor shooting
of *Saat Hindustani*



Abbas standing in front
of a huge banner made for
Saat Hindustani



Amitabh's big leap
into Goa in
Saat Hindustani



A collage showing all the pictures produced and directed by Abbas



Taking a close-up of
Simi in *Do Boond Pani*



Abbas with
Shashi Kapoor and
Inder Raj Anand

SATURDAY, MAY 31, 1964

by K.A. ABBAS

PAGE ELEVEN

NEHRU LIVES!

AT 2 p.m. on Wednesday 27th May, 1964, each one of us, four hundred fifty million Indians, died, as the great leader Jawaharlal Nehru, who was the heart of the nation, breathed his last. A solemn hush of silence descended on the nation. The farmer in the field, the worker in the factory, the clerk in the office, the housewife at their hearths, the children in schools—each and every one felt the sudden chill of spasm of death. **WHO LIVES IF NEHRU DIES?**

When Nehru died, we died — for Nehru was us, the soul and spirit of India. If it was Gandhi who raised us out of dust, it was Jawaharlal Nehru who gave us life, who gave us courage and the will to struggle for a better tomorrow. And when Nehru died, we died — each one of us felt the fatal breath of death. Life came to a stop at 2 p.m. on Wednesday the 27th May 1964.

Nehru Is Not Dead!

BUT BEHOLD THE MIRACLE. THE MOMENT OF DEATH IS ALSO THE MOMENT OF RESURRECTION. NEHRU IS NOT DEAD. NEHRU LIVES!

The flag flies half-mast over Rashtrapati Bhavan that was once the Viceroy's Lodge. But it is the flag of a free Sovereign Republic of India. Each flutter of the flag proclaims the freedom of India — and the resurrection of Jawaharlal Nehru.

From the silver gates of the mighty Bhakra Dam — "This great temple of New India" as Nehru called it — pours forth the powerful flood of sparkling waters that are bringing new life, new hope and new prosperity to the vast, once-arid tracts of the Punjab and Rajasthan, transforming deserts into corn-fields and flower gardens. In each glistening ripple of the Bhakra stream, in each ear of corn which raises its proud head to the sun, in each mustard flower that miraculously blooms in the desert, we shall always see the smiling face of Nehru that was, like a sunflower, always turned to the source of all light, all energy and all hope.

Rhythm Of Nehru's Name

Amidst the din and roar of the Bhakra Steel Plant, the silver pour, forth in a flowing dance, that steel will be shaped into tractors and machinery on all lines and telegraph poles, tanks and tanks and guns for national defence, electric power, cooking utensils for the housewife, and a strong for the musician. In Bihar in Durgam, in Karnataka and soon, in Madras, the thunder and roar of the mighty machine building a new tomorrow for millions will continue to heat to the rhythm of the name that was like a hammer-beat in the progress of India — Nehru! NEHRU!

BLITZ: MEMORIAL TO THE MAN OF THE CENTURY

The flag of India, the flag that is the symbol of planned progress, the state-owned steel plant. That of the three symbols of the Nehru era. There is a story behind them, behind each one of them.

Nehru Was His Ananda

BECAUSE Gandhi was a man of the people, Nehru was a man of the people. He was a man who was not just an able leader of the Mahatma, who carried out his master's orders with a little more dynamism than the other disciples. But Gandhi himself — from the time of the Non-Cooperation Movement — was often complimentary to the spiritualized politics of the Mahatma, but was seldom wholly subordinated to it.

But there is enough historical evidence to prove that, however respectful the young Nehru might have been to the Mahatma, he possessed a distinct individuality of his own which, in the context of the national movement, was often complementary to the spiritualized politics of the Mahatma, but was seldom wholly subordinated to it.



NEHRU... the thinker.

Much has been written about the influence of Gandhi on Jawaharlal, but a proper assessment has still to be made of how the rebellious spirit of Nehru progressively individualized the national movement that was led by the Mahatma.

"Inquilab Zindabad!"

At a time when the older leadership of the Congress was wedded to the moderate concept of dominion status it was Jawaharlal Nehru who, through the Independence of India League and other radical organizations like the Nagawan Bharat Sabha, pressed for complete independence as the national goal.

It was only at the end of 1929 when the Lahore session of the Congress met under Jawaharlal's presidency that the Congress formally accepted the goal of complete independence.

Of course, it was not Jawaharlal Nehru the imperious of history would have thrown up another revolutionary leader to save the national movement from the stultifying influence of the reformist moderate elements.

But the historical fact is that it was Jawaharlal Nehru who literally unfurled the flag of freedom on the banks of the Beas on the cold and foggy New Year eve of 1930. It was again Jawaharlal who, in his presidential address projected the national movement not in the prevalent reformist terminology but in a new dynamic and revolutionary idiom, ending his historical address with the slogan that was to become the battlecry of the Indian revolution: "Inquilab Zindabad!"

Whither India?

Again, it was he who drafted the Independence Pledge (taken on Independence Day, January 26, 1930) which interpreted the concept of freedom in not mystical, religious or purely nationalistic terms but, for the first time, defined the socio-economic content of freedom in those memorable words:

"We believe that it is the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people, to have freedom and TO ENJOY THE FRUITS OF THEIR TOIL AND TO HAVE THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE, so that they may have full opportunities of growth. We believe also that it is every government's duty to protect the rights and oppressions of the people have a further right to alter it or abolish it..."

Three years later, in 1933, distinguished by the persistently reformed leadership in the national movement, Jawaharlal, in a series of newspaper articles which created quite a sensation, posed the all-important question which is vitally relevant even today: "Whither India?" He declared his alternative from that nationalism which was really "reactionary, and something of the nature of religious fanaticism" he made a bold plea for a rational, scientific approach ("Our politics must either be based on logic or on science"), and threw the first stone

GOVERNMENT



Abbas with Nehru a few days before Nehru's death



Abbas receiving
Mrs Indira Gandhi at a
Film Festival Function
in Delhi

was the incident of a deceased uncle of mine who was a sessions judge who believed in blue blood and *Sharafat* and heredity—till one day his own son, spoilt by the company he kept, was hauled up in court to answer the charges of theft and robbery! Round about this theme and basic conflict I wrote a father and son story which I knew would be an ideal vehicle for the up-and-coming actor Raj Kapoor and his veteran father—Prithviraj Kapoor.

I knew both of them well. Prithviraj was then running his Prithvi Theatre. His *Deewar*, an allegorical play on partition, with sparkling and scintillating dialogue and many contemporary allusions, by my friend, Inder Raj Anand, and *Ghaddaar*, a play about nationalist Muslims and communalist Muslims—alas, too late to cancel the fact of partition—also written by Prithviraj with the dialogue by Inder Raj Anand. Most effective was his third play, *Pathaan*, which was the story of a Hindu Pathaan father, his friend—a Muslim Pathaan—and how the Muslim Pathaan (played by Prithviraj himself) sacrifices the life of his own son to stop a blood feud. In this play the real life son of Prithviraj—Raj Kapoor—played his son who was sacrificed. And that gave me the idea for the casting of *Awara*.

Mehboob Khan's film *Andaz* starring Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Nargis in a triangle story, had made a great impression on me so the first producer whom I approached with that story was Mehboob Khan. He liked the story very much but he wanted to cast Dilip Kumar as the son and Prithviraj as the father. That would rob the story of the piquancy of the real father and son relationship which, according to me, was the distinct and advantage, a scoop. I preferred Raj and Prithviraj—real son and father—to play the identical roles in the picture so I withdraw the story from Mehboob Saheb.

Meanwhile, Raj Kapoor had himself become a producer-director and had already made his first modern picture *Aag*, written by Inder Raj Anand, and was now producing his next film *Barsaat*, written by Ramanand Sagar (of *Aur Insaan Mar Gaya* fame). Raj heard from someone about the story I had and came to see me and Sathe. The moment he heard the story he said, "Abbas Saheb, this is mine. Please don't give it to anyone else. I will persuade my father to play the role that you have written for him." Raj's impetuosity and enthusiasm was

well-known to me from *Bombay Chronicle* days when I, Sathe and Inder Raj Anand, used to meet in the Marosa restaurant. Raj was then an assistant director known to me as Prithviraj's son, and he also used to come to the Marosa.

So I told Raj, the story was his. But actually, I had to go to Prithviraj's house, and read the story to him for his approval.

He made me nervous by asking me at the very outset, "I suppose you want me to play the hero's old father!" He had only recently played the leading role in the bilingual *Raj Nartaki* and was a handsome man, so he was quite self-conscious about playing character roles.

But I had the answer ready. "Prithviji, you are not the hero's father. You are the hero and Raj is your son."

I expected Raj to sit down beside me when I read the story for Prithviji. But he was so nervous, and moreover he could not smoke in front of his father (he did not do so, till Prithviji's dying day) so that he kept on flitting in and out of the room all the time, and heaved a sigh of relief when his father said, "Yes."

Raj Kapoor took two years to produce *Awara*. It was a unique production—it had all my scenes and dialogue, but it was embellished by Raj Kapoor's own comedy touches, songs and dances which Raj made pertinent to the story—specially the reel-long "dream sequence" for which he engaged Madame Simki, till recently the partner of Uday Shanker, to do the choreography.

I remember the night it was premiered. The whole industry was invited. After the show everyone walked out in silence, shaking hands with Raj Kapoor who was standing by the door, tense with suspense, as if to console him rather than congratulate him, "Well," they seemed to say, "It happens to the best of us. Flops come in the wake of hits!" The same night, at a cocktail party that had already been arranged, a distributor-financier told Raj in my hearing, "Well, that should teach you not to dabble in progressive and purposeful stories."

When everyone was gone, Raj asked me and Sathe, "Tell me, please. Is our picture so bad?"

I told him it wasn't bad at all. Personally, I was proud of it. The way he had directed and produced it, sparing neither money nor hard work, it was more than any writer had the

right to expect. As for being a hit, I asked him to wait for the next day—let the people give their verdict! They did, and it was a stupendous hit. The people did not mind the “progressive” story and dialogue. There were no awards in those days. But if there were, I am sure *Awara* would have swept the board and been acclaimed as the year’s best film.

My friend Manmohan was after me to take to film direction again. Our *Dharti ke Lal* debts had been paid off, in cash or kind, mainly by the efforts of Sathe, so we could start with a clean slate. In those days, there was a coffee house in the Fort Area where Manmohan used to daily meet an old school friend of his, also a refugee from the Punjab. Together they used to verbally plan and launch pictures over a cup of coffee, with but a rupee or two in their pockets. But they had contacts with a number of distributors and so, one day, they came to me with a proposal. “You write a story like *Awara*—direct and produce it. And we will finance you, so long you take the Raj and Nargis team.”

I said stories like *Awara* were hard to come by, but I would consult with Sathe and also ask if Raj and Nargis would agree to work in it.

And thus the idea of *Anhonee* was born—the same *Awara* theme of heredity and environment, with the same artiste playing both the roles—the daughter of a courtesan brought up in a respectable house, and the daughter of the respectably-married wife who was brought up by a courtesan and came to be loudmouthed, *pan*-chewing and cigarette-smoking Mohini, both in love with the same young lawyer. Nargis, when she heard the story, readily agreed and for her sake Raj, too, gave his consent.

And thus I was launched as a producer-director. I named my production unit not K.A.A. Productions but *Naya Sansar*—New World—which, apart from the title of my first screenplay, epitomized the ideals for which the pictures produced by the unit would stand.

Anhonee (The Impossible) was produced and directed by me in less than a year—both Raj and Nargis, after the success of *Awara*, had become busy stars—they were the most popular star team and worked in half a dozen pictures together, but they informally worked, whenever it was possible, in our picture.

The picture was completed, and was a moderate success. If for nothing else, the picture was remarkable for the acting of the contrasting double roles of Nargis. On giving delivery of prints to the distributors, Manmohan and Gulshan Rai made fifty thousand rupees each and then they parted. Manmohan invested his fifty thousand in my next picture. And Gulshan Rai used the money to set up a fancy distribution office, backing commercial pictures. Today he is worth crores, he is the producer of *Johnny Mera Naam* and *Deewar* and distributor of a dozen hit pictures—and Manmohan is where he started from—producing a picture, with me as a director! *Anhonee*, which made “The Impossible” possible for one partner, had made the “Possible Impossible” for the other partner. Loyalty to Khwaja Ahmad Abbas is a costly luxury!

Having completed and released it with fair success (it ran for eight weeks in the modest Super Cinema—it is necessary to say it because people still think that it was a big hit, but it wasn’t), I was on the lookout for a new subject for my new film, which Manmohan had promised to finance whatever the subject I chose. I selected a novel of Mulk Raj Anand called *Two Leaves and a Bud* and wrote my own screenplay based on it. Together with my art director and cameraman, I visited Assam which was the locale of the story about tea plantation workers. This visit was notable for the glimpse of Shillong, then the capital of Assam. It was a fascinating hill station made more fascinating by the kind hospitality of my old friend Birjees and her husband A.N. Kidwai, and their kid daughter named Shahnaz (Shanoo) whom I would take for a walk to the lake where both of us would try to catch fishes—in a bottle! But when we scouted for locations, we found that the plantation owners had read or at least heard of the novel as an *expose* of their exploitation, and so they chased us out of every plantation which we visited. We had to shift the location to the Indian-owned plantation in the Nilgiris at Coonoor near Ootacamund. Here the permission was readily given, provided the location (according to the story) remained Assam and only Englishmen were supposed to be the managers and the assistant managers. The manager was played by Moussino, a mousy-looking weak man, but the assistant manager (who was the villain of the piece) was played by S. Michael, an Anglo-Indian

from Lucknow who spoke such good and colloquial Urdu that I had to teach him how to corrupt his Hindustani speech and speak like a *burra saheb*.

Dev Anand played the labour supervisor who begins by whipping the workers, including the heroine but in the end is won over to their side, and Nalini Jaywant was his worker-beloved. I was made in Hindustani and in English—for since I had seen films like *Ganga Din* with American actors playing the roles of Indians I wanted to have my revenge by making Indians play English characters—Balraj Sahni was the English doctor, a sympathetic character, and Kate Sethi, an English-woman married with an Indian, was his beloved.

The English version could not be shown in England due to the agitation launched by the British planters in India. They wrote to the Prime Minister of India asking for a ban on it in India, too, in the interest of Commonwealth unity. I met the P.M. and he asked his secretary in my presence what was the reply when India had launched similar protest against anti-Indian American films running in England, and he said, "They wrote that England is a free country and, subject to normal censorship, any picture could be shown."

"Then repeat the same message to them," the Prime Minister ordered his secretary, and there the matter rested. I was assured that the picture would have been a hit—but for its tragic end. But I couldn't change the end and so the picture cost us about a lakh in losses.

Dev Anand and Nalini Jaywant were not big stars at that time, but still they created problems for us during the shooting—which resulted in upsetting my schedule, my budget—and my mood.

Therefore, for my third production I selected a story which was episodic and, but for a six-year old child Romi, did not require any actor or actress for more than ten days. For the roles in each episode I selected well-known and good character actors and actresses, not stars, and for the role of the mother who the child is searching I brought Tripti Mitra, the heroine of *Dharti ke Lal*, from Calcutta.

The result was *Munna*—one of the most satisfying pictures that I have made. It was the first Hindustani picture to have no songs in it, and so it had a negative significance which we

were not reluctant to exploit. In Bombay at Krishna Cinema we put a signboard declaring in big letters that "This picture has no songs. If you see it to the end and do not think you have got your money's worth, you can get your ticket money refunded." I stood there waiting for someone who would come with a claim for refund, but no one came. However, in parts of India where we could not control the distribution directly, the picture was declared a flop and quite substantial amounts of the "advance amounts" had to be paid back by us. And thereby hangs a tale.

When the picture was under production and I decided not to have songs, I wrote frankly to all my distributors offering to cancel their contracts if they felt unsure of distributing a songless picture. Several distributors took advantage of it and got out of their contracts for songs were supposed to be the *sine qua non* of every Hindi picture. Our distributor of CPCI cancelled the contract but verbally offered to buy back the picture at the same price—provided he liked it when it was complete. I said that would cost him a fine, too, and mentioned the figure of fifteen thousand rupees as "the fine." As it happened, on the day the censors passed the picture and complimented me on producing a songless picture, I held a trial for some friends and that distributor happened to be present at the screening. After the show he went away. That night I and Manmohan returned home at about 10 p.m. and I said to him, "What if so-and-so distributor is waiting for us!" Manmohan looked round for the distributor's car, and said, "No, he never said a word after the screening. Moreover his car would have been here." We entered the drawingroom (I was then living in Union Park, Khar) and found the distributor there, waiting for us. He said he had liked the picture; it had emotions, so one never felt the absence of songs. I was gratified. He placed five thousand rupees on the table and said he had come to sign the picture. I asked him: Did he remember about the fine? He said yes, he did. He would pay fifteen thousand extra. I told him in that case we would sign the contract tomorrow in the office. He wanted to sign there and then but we were too tired to bring out the typewriter and prepare the contract. So we asked him to keep his money with him till tomorrow. We would meet in the office in less than eighteen hours. So after making the firm

appointment we parted, feeling certain that tomorrow the contract would be signed.

But in the Indian film world, it is said, you cannot be sure of anything. So it happened. Next day, we waited in the office for four hours, but the distributor did not come.

Next day we learnt that he had gone back to Amravati. When we trunk-called him there he spoke in a different vein. He said next week when he would come to Bombay he would "discuss" the matter.

What had happened in the night to make him change his tune—from warm enthusiasm to cold indifference? On the way back their taxi had a tyre burst and had almost overturned. An inauspicious omen, a warning from above! That's what his friend warned him. "Don't sign this picture." And he didn't. After months of negotiations we gave it on advance for thirty-five thousand rupees and out of that had to return twenty thousand when the distributors claimed the refund and sent us the detailed account to support their claim. That's business in the film world!

Munna was the story of a child separated from his mother. Some of the educationists of Bombay had seen it and liked it and made it obligatory on all the municipal school students to see the picture. So we had bumper block bookings for the weeks it ran at the solitary Krishna Cinema. It was supposed to be a moderate success in Bombay.

Encouraged by the Bombay educationists, I wrote a letter to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Politically, the Prime Minister and we (of *Blitz*) were not seeing things in the same perspective. But, nevertheless, Panditji's interest in children was proverbial and he never allowed politics to interfere with personal relations. Promptly came the reply inviting me to bring the picture to Delhi and he would see it on the evening of 13 August 1954, at Rashtrapati Bhawan at 9.p.m. if it was OK with us.

Of course, it was OK with us. One by one, more unit members came forward to avail of this opportunity to be present at the special screening for Panditji.

It was 9-30 p.m. and we were in the special underground auditorium of Rashtrapati Bhawan.

Some people from the staff of Rashtrapati Bhawan had already come and occupied the front rows.

The last three rows were kept reserved for Panditji and his party.

But there was no sign of Panditji.

We were on tenterhooks. Besides myself there were Manmohan Krishna, Achala Sachdev, Shammi the actress, Ramchandra the cameraman, and, of course, Romi the child star of the film.

At 9-45 p.m. I telephoned Panditji's house, and was told that Panditji had just left for Rashtrapati Bhawan.

Five minutes later Panditji entered, followed by Indira Gandhi, and others of his household. I welcomed him. He said he was sorry but there was an unexpected dinner for someone and he couldn't get away. I introduced little Romi and said he was the hero of the film.

Panditji confided to me that he was feeling sleepy and if he felt sleepy during the film, he begged to be excused. "In jail I have trained myself to fall asleep as soon as the lights go off, and I wouldn't like to be seen sleeping when the lights come on."

I felt very nervous. Suppose Panditji did feel sleepy? Suppose he walked out of the show? What adverse publicity it would be if it leaked out. So I took Romi aside and told the child to sit on the carpet near Panditji's feet and if he found him about to go, he was to hold on to his feet and start crying. "Don't let him go," I appealed to the child.

Panditji sat down on his chair and pressed me to sit beside him. I welcomed the opportunity and kept on a running commentary—really to keep him awake at though ostensibly introducing the various artistes who made their appearance on the screen.

At last Panditji whispered to me, "Abbas, you are a fool. I gave you more credit for intelligence than that. Stop this talk and let me enjoy the film. I know the Hindustani language. I was only joking about going away."

I was really relieved to hear that. After that I didn't disturb Panditji except to offer him a cold drink in the interval. In the second half, Manmohan Krishna asked his children "Who is the President of India?" and they all looked blissfully blank and

one of them scratched his head and halfheartedly said, "Jawaharlal Nehru." Immediately afterwards he asked "Who is the hero of *Awara*?" they all shouted in chorus, "Raj Kapoor." Panditji gave a hearty chuckle and told me to remind him later to tell us a story of his school days.

When the picture ended, we could see that Panditji was pleased. But we had come hoping for an invitation to his house.

He fondled Romi, patted him on the back, and asked him, "What are you going to do tomorrow?"

The child replied, "Panditji, I will see the famous places of Delhi—like Gandhiji's *samadhi*, the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid and the Qutab Minar."

"Then you must show him our house, too," he said to me.

"Certainly—if we have your permission. What time shall we come?"

"Come any time—I will tell my secretary to let you and him come in when you like."

"But we would like to come when you are there." "Then come and have breakfast with me. But who are we?"

I pointed to all my whole group that was lined up there.

"The invitation is only for you and the child," he said.

"We are all *your* children, Panditji," Manmohan Krishna chimed in.

He turned to his daughter. "Indira, can you manage to give breakfast to all of them? Have we sufficient number of eggs?"

She said it could be managed.

"All right, then I will expect you *all* at eight-thirty in the morning."

Excited like children, we trooped in fifteen minutes earlier in Panditji's house. After waiting in the famous reception room, we were taken by one of his secretaries to the diningroom where, indeed, the table was laid for all of us. Punctually at eight-thirty Panditji entered. We all got up.

Panditji sat down, with me on one side and little Romi on the other. Next to me sat Indiraji. I asked her whether Panditji was joking last night about the eggs. "No, it's amazing how much entertainment goes on in this place. And the rising prices affect the Prime Minister's household as well as others.

If it was a joke, it was at my expense, not yours."

It happened to be Manmohan Krishna's birthday and I quietly whispered the secret to Panditji. He congratulated the actor-singer and demanded that on the happy occasion he should entertain the guests. Manmohan Krishna felt flattered, and obliged with a song in his melodious voice—but it was not from *Munna* which had no song!

Later, I asked Panditji to tell us about the joke that came to his mind when seeing *Munna*.

"It is not a joke—it is a real life story. Some sixty years ago, a new Liberal Party government was sworn in England. The class master at Harrow asked his class to mention the names of some ministers. Everyone kept silent, because no one had read the papers. Only one Indian boy could mention the whole Cabinet—their names and their designations. Can you guess his name?"

"Jawaharlal Nehru," said all of us in chorus.¹

When I have returned to Saiyidain's bungalow, there was a local letter and a telegram waiting for me. The letter was from the Prime Minister of India—he must have dictated and signed it in the morning or even late after midnight. It said:

As you know, I rarely go to see films and my average is perhaps two a year. This is not because I disapprove of films, but because I find it difficult to find the time.

I was glad, however, to have the opportunity of seeing your film, *Munna*. I am not much of a judge because of my lack of experience in such matters. But I liked this film and consider it good from many points of view. It was a simple story artistically told without too much embellishment or overstatement. The members of the cast performed their parts well, especially, Munna, the boy.

¹It is mentioned in his *Autobiography* thus: "I was greatly interested in the General Election, which took place, as far as I remember, at the end of 1905 and which ended in a great Liberal victory. Early in 1906 our form master asked us about the new government and, much to his surprise, I was the only boy in his form who could give him much information on the subject, including almost a complete list of members of Campbell-Bannerman's Cabinet."

I wish there were more films like this in India.

The telegram was from my office in Bombay: "Invitation Received For Moscow From Sovexportfilm Return Immediately."

37. In the Land of the Red Star!

In the autumn of 1954, the entire Soviet Union was shaken by a minor revolution. It was caused by a young Indian in ill fitting Western clothes, a tramp by his appearance, a pick-pocket by profession, but a gay, compassionate and rather romantic character, like all vagabonds, who went about singing "*Awara Hoon*"—A Tramp Am I! This strange character overnight became the most popular figure in the country, people stood in queues for hours, in rain and later in the snow, to see him and to hear him sing, yet the tramp was only a shadow, a character in a film.

From Moscow to Vladivostok, from the frozen icecap in the Arctic where a steel box containing the film was airdropped, along with oranges from the south, as a seventh of November surprise gift to the marooned group of scientists on a Polar expedition, to the ancient, dusty lanes of Bokhara in the hot south, where Uzbek boys went about singing the original Hindustani songs, the film *Awara* (or *Brodagya*, as the Russian-dubbed version was called) swept the land like a prairie fire. Within a few months, all bands and orchestras in hotels and restaurants were playing the tunes from this film, Russian and Ukrainian and Georgian teenagers were singing the *Awara* songs in chorus, and one met young people who boasted that they had seen the film twenty or thirty times. In the whole history of the Soviet cinema, no film had ever won such popularity, and no film or stage star had won such renown in so short a time. Jawaharlal Nehru, who went to the Soviet Union the following year, was told that, beside himself, there was only one Indian who was equally well-known. It was Raj Kapoor!

I had something to do with this success of *Awara* and the popularity of Raj Kapoor in the USSR. I had written the

story, the screenplay (along with Sathe) and the dialogue of the film. I was also the leader of the first Indian film delegation to the USSR. This consisted of four other producers-directors—the late Bimal Roy, Raj Kapoor, Chetan Anand and Vijay Bhatt; four stars—Nargis, Dev Anand, the late Balraj Sahni and Nirupa Roy; two music directors (Anil Biswas and Salil Choudhury) and technicians—Hrishikesh Mukherjee (script writer and editor of Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin*, Radhu Karmakar (cinematographer of *Awara* and subsequent RK Pictures including *Bobby*) and Rajbans Khanna (PRO of Bimal Roy Productions). We had taken along five films—Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin*, Raj Kapoor's *Awara*, my own *Rahi*, Chetan Anand's *Andhian* and Vijay Bhatt's *Baiju Bawra*.

Over travel from Bombay to Moscow was itself symbolic of the isolation of the Soviet Union that had been imposed by Stalin. We had to go by Air India to Geneva and stop there for a day. We took the opportunity to pay a courtesy call on Charlie Chaplin whom we all admired for his great films from *Gold Rush* to *The Great Dictator* and *Monsieur Verdoux*. He was living in a picturesquely situated and luxuriously furnished chalet near Geneva, and the white-haired veteran received us with great affection and warmth. We invited him to come to India, sometimes, and though he accepted our invitation, it looked more out of courtesy and kindness because it seemed as if he had become a recluse in that beautiful corner of Switzerland, and had no more wanderlust left in him.

Next morning we took a Swissair plane to Zurich, from which we changed over to Czech Airlines to cross over behind the so-called "Iron Curtain." We were received in Prague by representatives of Sovexportfilm, our hosts in Moscow, who entertained us to a sumptuous lunch.

Then we boarded a small Dakota-like Aeroflot plane for Moscow. It was nearly 2 p.m.

Evening falls early in winter in central Europe and by 5 p.m. the sky was quite dark. In the plane, the solitary efficient and functionally-dressed (without make-up) air hostess served us lemon tea in glasses and gave us each a packet of biscuits to eat. By 8 p.m. we were told that we would halt at Minsk for dinner.

"Look, Abbas, look there!" Balraj Sahni excitedly pointed to me through the window, "There is the red star to greet us."

I looked out and in the darkness saw the red star—but it seemed to be following us, parallel to our plane. Our disillusionment was complete when we found the "red star" was only the "red light" to warn the other planes in the area of our presence. It was not yet time to reach Moscow by the slow plane we were taking.

But, two hours later, when out of the darkness, hundreds of thousands of lights seemed to be spinning up and among those lights there were many red stars visible in the sky not above but below us, we knew we were at last in Moscow.

I woke up Raj, and arranged the order in which we would descend upon the "Red Earth." Raj and Nargis with Bimal Roy and Balraj Sahni behind them, then Dev and Nirupa, Chetan and Vijay Bhatt and the other technicians, with me, the leader of the delegation, bringing up the rear! But first we had to allow the few other passengers to get out. They were quite awed by the huge arc lights on the apron, with television and newsreel cameras staring us in the eye. Then the plane stopped and our descent started. By the time I got down the whole delegation had been offered bouquets of flowers, embraced and even kissed, and we had forgotten that it was in a temperature only two or three degrees above freezing point. An elderly and portly lady came to me and introduced herself as the interpreter of our group. Anil Biswas there and then christened her *Didi*, Hindi and Bengali for elder sister.

In the crowded melee I met the chubby Tikki Kaul, also in a huge overcoat, then First Secretary of our embassy (now the Ambassador in Washington). He represented the Ambassador who sent his regrets and a cordial welcome, and invited us to dinner on the very next day when some Soviet ministers would also be present. Then, as we were at last told that our baggage was in the cars and we made a move towards the exits, I saw in a corner what I was seeking all along. It was a marble bust of Stalin on a pedestal. He seemed to be scowling at us. Within less than a year of his death, he had already been pushed in a corner, and I knew then what Ehrenburg meant by the title of his latest novel—*The Thaw*. Stalin, even his memory, was on

the way out!

We arrived at the small but extremely comfortable Hotel Sovietskaya which was the setting of the Three-Power Conference after the war, and, as the leader of the delegation, I was given a suite of rooms that had been used by British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden.

I had my first lesson in the Russian alphabet at 2 a.m. in the morning when we were herded into the diningroom where a grand supper was spread out for us—caviar and cold fish, *borsch*, *kotlet Kievskaya* (which was Kievsky cutlet with sizzling butter in its ample interior), bread and butter. Then I knew from the signboard on the entrance that restaurant is spelt ПЕТОПАИ in Russian—and that is how I was introduced to (what appeared to us) the peculiarities of the Russian script. That “P” is “R”; “C” is “S”; and “H” is “N”! I soon conveyed my knowledge to my delegation colleagues and urged *Didi* (her name, Lydia Yevgenia Moroshkina was unpronounceable to most of us for a long time!) to teach each of us to pronounce the numbers from one to ten so that they could communicate with each other through the switchboard operator. It was nearly three in the morning when we retired for the night—or the morning!

I was awakened by two people talking in whispered Russian—one woman and the other a man.

I switched on the light and looked about with sleepy eyes but saw no one. Yet the whispering continued. All that I had read about the OGPU flashed through my mind—“bugging” and all that—but I was not going to stand it, I would expose the OGPU agents!

I got up, armed with my leather belt, and pulled apart the curtains from where the whispers were emanating. Outside a sleet was falling. It was morning, yet it was quite dark. Inside, there was a wooden box-like contraption and the whispers were coming from that.

I fiddled with the knob and soon Radio Moscow was giving the news of our arrival—I guessed it when all our names were pronounced or mispronounced—and the voice changed from female to male with each sentence. Last night the amplifier had been tuned low and this gave the impression of whispered

conversation! I wondered then whether behind all the spy stories and behind all the superstitions about abnormal phenomena or ghost stories—there was not a similarly simple explanation like a tuned-low radio amplifier.

We spent the first day in Moscow, walking about the streets, going down to the metro stations which were like marble palaces, and even took the tram sometimes—we had not acquired any roubles or kopeks and didn't know any words of Russian beyond the introduction—*Indiesky kino Delegatsi*—but evidently this was the open sesame which opened all doors, paid for all our tickets, and brought smiles to the faces of all citizens. It was the last day when we would be unrecognized. From tonight we would be in newsreels and television and some of us—the film stars—actually on the cinema screens, and our anonymity would be gone. All the courtesy and kindness that we got that day was for the magical word *Indiesky*—and the immediate response was a broad smile and the exclamation, “Ah, *iz straniya* Nehru?” (from the land of Nehru?) or “Ah, Nehru, *bolshoi droog mira*” (Nehru—big friend of peace!) That was the simple equation which served us on that first day—we were from the land of Nehru, and Nehru was for peace! Hence the smiles, the grins, the handclasps, and (occasionally) the hug and the kisses.

That evening, the festival of our Indian films opened with the screening of *Do Bigha Zamin*—Bimal Roy's realistic classic of a peasant who becomes a rickshaw-puller in Calcutta.

At the end of the picture, we got a tumultuous standing ovation which was beyond our expectations. The critics—both of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*—had given rave reviews—it was the kind of picture which would appeal to the critics and intellectuals who filled the hall. We were glad of its success and congratulated Bimal Roy, but Raj Kapoor seemed to be a bit subdued, if not altogether depressed. “What about our *Awara*?” he asked me anxiously. I reassured him, “Wait till tomorrow. Tonight let's enjoy the dinner at the embassy!”

Our Ambassador in Moscow, K.P.S. Menon, was surely the best man we could have in the post-Stalin Soviet Union. He was

urbane without being superficial, an intellectual without being verbose or pedantic, a disciplinarian with a sense of humour, he was genial without being flippant, dignified without being pompous. His long years in the civil service had not made him into a bureaucrat. He and his wife were the best people to represent us in Moscow during *The Thaw*.

It was at his house that we gathered that night—and so did fifteen ministers, deputy ministers and officials of the State Planning Commission. Sitting between me and Nirupa Roy at the dining table was the affable Andrei Gromyko, the Foreign Minister, who spoke excellent English.

Mr Gromyko was surprised when the waiter came round with drinks and I said "No, thanks, I don't drink."

"Not even Russian vodka, the milk of the mad cow?"

I said, "No, sorry."

He said, "But you must. In this awful cold it is necessary. To put a blanket inside of you, as they call it!"

The time came for toasts.

K.P.S. Menon proposed a toast for the guests and with it he combined all the leaders of the Soviet government.

We all raised our glasses containing vodka, whisky, and wine—and I raised my glass of water and drank it.

But the water looked like vodka so everyone imagined I had drunk vodka. I was saved.

Now the chairman of the Soviet Planning Commission proposed a toast to Jawaharlal Nehru, the man of peace, and with it he combined all the Indian guests—including the film delegation. Everyone raised their glasses—I also raised my glass of water—or so I thought—and took it in one big gulp. A double-edged knife slid through my throat. It was not *wada* (water) but vodka. Gromyko (who had taken advantage of my attention being turned to the proposer of the toast and substituted his glass containing vodka for my glass containing water), had a hearty laugh.

"Congratulations, Abbas Saheb," said Raj from across the table, "You have taken your first vodka. Bravo!"

It seemed everyone on the table had been told of my predicament and all, Russians and Indians, were laughing—at my expense. I felt a strange warmth rising inside me, and I also joined in the laughter.

After dinner we transferred ourselves to the drawingroom where some of us, film delegates, preferred to sit on the carpeted floor. While waiting for coffee to be served, K.P.S. proposed an improvised concert of Indian and Russian songs. We had at least two full-fledged music directors among us, and Raj could both sing and play the drum on the coffee table. So we started with Salil Choudhury's *Bhatiali* and then requested the Russian guests to answer—in music! I didn't think they would be able to sing—after all they were ministers who, at least in our country, are not known for their musical voices. I did not know then that music was a compulsory subject in every Soviet school. I was pleasantly surprised when a Russian guest—a minister—began *Vechernaya Moskava* (Moscow evenings) and all the others joined in the chorus. Thereafter an Indian song was followed by a Russian song till it was past midnight. We called it a draw.

After the Russian ministers and their wives had departed, K.P.S. Menon said that, thanks to the film delegation, India had scored a diplomatic coup. It was the first time that so many Russian ministers and the members of the Politbureau had come to any embassy party and stayed so long and enjoyed themselves so well.

"Well, Abbas, your film delegation, you will be glad to know, has helped in the process of *The Thaw*," said K.P.S. Menon, "Didn't you see the big ones melting under the magic of the Indian melodies?"

Next day *Awara* (or *Brodagya*, as it was called in Russian) was premiered in one of the biggest halls in Moscow. The dubbing was perfect and we could imagine Raj and Nargis and Prithviraj speaking Russian.

There is a dialogue in *Awara* which, with the author's permission, I had "borrowed" from one of Krishenchander's stories. It is where Raj and Nargis are having a romantic interlude in a sailing boat.

Raj is coming too near to take her in his arms, and Nargis says, "One step more and you will upset the balance of this boat! We will both drown!"

"Then what shall we do?" asks the frustrated Raj.

"Then," replies Nargis, with the passion of love in her voice,

"Let us drown!"

No one had noticed it in India. But, imagine my surprise when in the first show in Moscow, one of our interpreters, a young girl, said to me, "You *stole* that dialogue from Krishen chander's story."

"I *borrowed* it from his story," I corrected her, "But how do you know?"

"Everyone knows Krishenchander's story—*The Night of the Full Moon!*"

When the show was over, the audience went mad with joy. They gave Raj and Nargis not only a standing ovation but clapped and clapped till they got them on the stage. They shouted for their favourites to speak. I had prepared Raj just for such an emergency. Raj raised his hands for silence and, when it was restored, he began. Much to the delight of the audience, he spoke in Russian.

"*Tovarishi ee Druziya*" he began, "Comrades and friends, *Ya lubloo vas ee vi lubite minya.*" (I love you and you love me). "*Dosvidaniya!*" (Goodbye).

After that, the roar of applause was so much that I thought the roof was coming down.

It was the same wherever we went—in Leningrad, in Stalingrad (which would soon be named as Volgograd), in Tashkent and in Tblisi, where ten thousand young people surrounded our hotel and we had to be taken out by the service entrance into a back alley under police protection. In any other country the police would have cleared the crowd with *lathi* or baton charges or tear gas.

But in Tblisi the police commissioner of the city shrugged his shoulders in utter helplessness.

"It is unprecedented. But what can we do? They are only demonstrating their love and admiration for the Indian artistes. They are not doing anything subversive or breaking any law. I cannot touch them except to allow them to disperse and, instead, to crowd the cinema houses."

No one connected with *Awara* ever expected that it would achieve such phenomenal popularity—neither its director-hero Raj Kapoor, nor its scenario-writer who happened to be me! We thought we had made a good enough film within the limits

of commercial Indian cinema, offering its progressive social message (criminals are not born but are created by social injustice) rather attractively packaged in a pattern of romance, comedy and somewhat jazzy music. It was a hit in India. But in our wildest dreams we had never expected that people steeped in the traditions of "socialist realism," who were familiar with the classics produced by such masters of realistic cinema as Eisenstein and Pudovkin, would take more than a passing interest in such a film. But that is exactly what they did, and thus raised issues and sparked discussions on art and aesthetics that shook the entire cultural world of the Soviet Union.

I once asked a student, "What was so remarkable about *Awara* that you people went crazy about it?"

In reply, he asked a counter-question, "Have you seen the films we have been seeing for the last twenty years?"

I could not claim to have seen all of them, but I remembered a few—*The Childhood of Maxim Gorki*, one of Donskoi's earliest films, *Fall of Berlin*, with the heroic father figure of Stalin in the midst of spectacularly photogenic battles in colour, and a strident, screeching sound track oozing with patriotism; *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein's masterpiece about the despot who revolutionized Russia; *Country Teacher*, rather a touching characterization of a woman who devotes all her life to the cause of children's education—a kind of female "Mr Chips"; and a series of inconsequential but well-meaning contemporary stories about earnest-minded young men and women increasing production on farms and in factories. Seen in India, amidst the plethora of films with no other aim but entertainment, the Soviet films had impressed us with their sobriety and purposefulness. And so I said, "Well, I rather liked them, especially some of your war films were really impressive."

"But don't you see we are tired of the war, we went through it, and now must we re-live it in every book we read, in every film or play that we see? Instead of war, we want to see love on the screen, we want to see carefree happiness, we want someone to make us laugh. That's why we are crazy about *Awara*."

Roughly it was the same situation in the other spheres of cultural activity. The contemporary plays had to be taken off for lack of audiences, but classical plays drew full houses. At

one time in Moscow there were three plays of Shakespeare simultaneously running in different theatres—*Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and one ballet—*Romeo and Juliet*. In fact all the operas and ballets were well patronized compared to contemporary realistic theatre.

The Soviet people are voracious readers—but in 1954, except for two contemporary novels, *Young Guard* and *Story of a Real Man*, they were reading mainly Russian and foreign classics, or the detective stories of Conan Doyle and the science fiction of Jules Verne.

The Stalin era, by its insistence on, and encouragement of, dry, propagandist, conformist literature and art, seemed to have created an unspoken but deeply felt revulsion among the people which found its first open and rather wild expression in the fantastic popularity of *Awara*. It was as if every one who went to see this film was registering a protest against the dullness and over-purposefulness of the fare served to him for so many years on the Soviet stage and screen.

If Moscow was the political and industrial capital of the USSR, Leningrad was the art and cultural centre of the country.

Yet this city went through a long period of siege during the war, when thousands of people died of starvation and disease. The people of Leningrad themselves are reluctant to talk of those terrible times. But others told me of how the city starved under the blockade, how the grain ration per head dwindled from a few ounces to a few grams, how every eatable and uneatable animal was a slaughtered and consumed, how people became like skeletons, so weak that they would go to sleep and never get up again, how for days and weeks the corpses lay unattended in the houses as the Nazis, only a few miles away, continued to pound the city with bombs and shells, not only to destroy what buildings they could, but to shatter the nerves of the people. . . .

It is a grim story but also a heroic, inspiring story. . . .except for Stalingrad, another hero city, never before in recorded history have the whole people of a city shown such courage and fortitude, such phenomenal powers of endurance, as the people of Leningrad in those dark and desperate days.

The people of Leningrad have, within less than ten years, rebuilt their city, and also rebuilt their war-shattered lives. They have restored all its beauty spots. Today it is an industrious, thriving, prosperous city, its factories and ship-building yards are all working overtime to make up for shortages caused by war. Leningrad is truly the phoenix city—out of its ashes has arisen a new Leningrad, symbol of revolution, resistance and reconstruction!

In Tashkent we were back in Asia. Sitting round a *dastarkhan* on the floor of a hotel, with *naan* and *kabab* and *pulao*, Raj Kapoor broke a bread, smelt it, and remarked “Even this *naan* smells of home!” And I made a speech, entirely made up of words common between Urdu and Uzbek—words like *naan*, *kabab*, *pulao*, *shorba*, *halwa*, *mohabbat*, *rifaqat*, *aman* and *inquilab*! The audience seemed to get the message of the *inquilab* (revolution) climaxing the unity of our cultures, and applauded not so much *me* as the *message*!

Some young dancers and singers came to see us off at the airport. And, while waiting for the plane, one of them said to me through an interpreter, “Mr Abbas, may I be your Uzbek daughter?” “Of course,” I said, and even now she sends me a birthday greeting card signed by “Your Uzbek daughter.”

Georgia, the homeland of Stalin, was the last on our itinerary.

The Georgians (unlike what we hear of Stalin) are warm-hearted, impulsive, and sentimental like the Asiatics. They love to drink, to manufacture wine, to give feasts, to drink toasts, to tell tales of chivalry and love, and to be overproud of their distinctive culture—including their language and their script which they have refused to Russianize. They learn Russian only as a second language for inter-republic communication. Even the children of Russians who are domiciled in Georgia (or, for that matter, in Uzbekistan) must receive their education in Georgian or in Uzbek, as the case might be. That is “provincial autonomy” within the framework of the Soviet Union. A Georgian newspaper looks like a Malayalam newspaper to us.

Near Tblisi is Gori, the village where Stalin was born in the house of a cobbler. In the museum of Stalin’s momentoes are framed texts of poems written by Joseph as a student, including

“I Wandered Across The World”:

In the moonlit night
An old man sat and sang of his bitter life—
On this earth, like a shade,
He had wandered far and wide.
With a *paridoot* (musical instrument) in his hands,
From which music poured like a sunshine. . .
And this melody was the real Truth,
And some higher Love.
It came to the hearts that were stones
And to the minds that were dark
And made some minds bright with the sunshine of Truth.

It was difficult to think that the same Joseph Stalin would one day become a tyrant—as would be revealed soon in the Khrushchev report to the twentieth Party Congress.

I was a browser of the old bookshops in Bombay. Once, turning over the pages of a magazine in a foreign language that I guessed was Russian, I saw my by-line in the Russian script. It was presumably a short story written by me. So I bought the magazine *Ogoneok* for just a quarter of a rupee and took it to my friend Mulk Raj Anand, an old Russian hand who had visited Moscow more than once. With his little knowledge of Russian, he confirmed that it was a short story written by me which has been translated and published in the *Ogoneok* which, he said, was one of the most popular magazines. There was then no copyright in the Soviet Union but he gave me a letter to the Union of Soviet Writers suggesting that, if possible, they should give me some roubles, to buy some souvenirs, since I was coming to Moscow with the film delegation.

On the third or fourth day in Moscow a courier came from the Union of Writers and asked me if I ever wrote short stories in a Pakistani paper. I named the Pakistani Urdu magazines which usually published my short stories. Thereupon he handed me a fat envelope which, I found later, contained several thousand roubles for which he asked me to sign a receipt. This was for three stories of mine which had been translated into Russian from Pakistani magazines. A Russian writers

delegation had been to Pakistan but when they landed there they were informed that they would be unwelcome in the country, so they took the next plane back—and also took with them a number of Urdu magazines. That is how Krishen chander, I, Ismat and Bedi were introduced to the Soviet Union. In the beginning all of us were known as “Pakistani” writers.

The courier also invited me to visit the office of the Union. One of the secretaries—Boris Polevoi—whose novel *The Story of a Real Man* I had already read, it was one of the best novels which had come out after the war, and I was eager to meet him.

Knowing that Soviet currency had to be spent in Soviet Union and could not be taken out of the country, I decided to give two hundred roubles to each member of the delegation as even then I could have a few hundred roubles left. But it was then the old rouble which had no value in the international market, and even in the Soviet Union would soon be substituted by the new rouble which was equal to ten old roubles. According to the prices of clothes marked in the shop windows, I calculated that I could have bought a fur collared thick woollen overcoat with all the four thousand roubles. Even that was not to be sneered at for the price of three short stories. I didn't get a fraction of it from the Indian and Pakistani publishers who originally printed them.

And so the time came for the delegation to leave. I was not to go with them, as I had been invited for the Soviet Writers' Congress which was to be held next month. I also had to attend the Peace Conference meeting in Stockholm. There was an urgent message from Ramesh Chandra, the secretary of the Indian Peace Council (now the secretary-general of the World Peace Congress). There was an amusing passage at arms between the Union of Writers and the Sovexportfilm, my original hosts. The Union of Writers wanted to “take me over” and be responsible for my hospitality but the Sovexportfilm countered with “What do you mean by that? Mr Abbas came as our guest and he can stay as long as he wishes. Let him attend the Peace Council and the Writers' Congress—we don't mind. But so long as he stays he will continue to be a guest of the Sovexportfilm.” I was flattered by this bickering but I secretly wanted to stay in the same room, the Writers' Union would have

taken me to a bigger and grander—and more uncomfortable—hotel.

The farewell to the delegation at the airport was tearful on both sides—the Indians are notoriously sentimental, but the Russians proved no less. There were several hundred of them there at the freezing hour of midnight in the draughty airport, muffled up to their ears in overcoats and woollen scarves. There were some actors and actresses—including one very beautiful young actress—officially assigned to bid us farewell, and I noticed that she was crying as she embraced and kissed Nargis and Nirupa Roy. The plane left in the early hours of the morning and the whole crowd came out on the runway, sending flying kisses in that near-freezing temperature. Raj Kapoor, of course, had the last word, as from the ramp of the plane, he shouted, "*Ya lubloo vas ee vi lubite minya.*" (I love you all, and you love me). There was clapping and cheering and tearful eyes as the plane took off with the "*Indiesky kino delegatsi*" (Indian film delegates) who had become such a part of Soviet life within the three weeks that they were there. It was almost dawn.

I returned to my hotel, and gave a lift in the car to the most beautiful young actress. She was not made-up, but she had a natural glow and glamour of her own. I asked her through my interpreter where she would be getting down and was surprised to hear, "You drop me at the university. Soon my classes will begin. Meanwhile, I will take a cup of tea in the buffet."

"What are you studying?"

"Philosophy," she replied. You could have knocked me out with a feather.

"What class?"

"I am a *candidate*," she replied. That meant that she, a young and glamorous actress, was taking her Ph. D. in philosophy.

38. Three-Legged Race

For the next three years I was to be very much involved with the Soviet Union. All this time either I and my wife were in Moscow, discussing the plans for the co-production film which was to be released in India under the title of *Pardesi*, or I was entertaining groups of Soviet writers and production executives on their visit to discuss the script or to scout Indian locations for the film.

We had arrived at a simple solution to a complex problem—the budgetary share of each side. I proposed, and my Soviet partners, the Mosfilm Studio of Moscow, concurred with me, that all expenses in India would be borne by *Naya Sansar*, while all expenses in the Soviet Union were to be met by the Mosfilm Studio. Since most of the shooting would be done in India and most of the stars would be Indian, the Soviet side of the expenses would include the colour raw stock, editing, background music and re-recording, and the preparation of up to a hundred prints that we would need for India and “Indian overseas.”

Likewise the territories would be divided—India and the “Indian overseas” (where substantial number of Indian settlers are and where the Indian version could be exploited) were to be with us; while the Soviet Union and all the communist countries would be with the Soviet Union, and the rest of the Western world would be exploited by Sovexportfilm on a fifty-fifty basis.

The division of creative labour was the real problem. Here the Soviet Union also agreed to what appeared to me, then, as a simple solution—there would be two art directors, two cameramen, two music composers, two editors—one from India, and the other from Russia. This would prove a headache—and the compromises between the two sides would dilute the creative content of the film.

At the end of 1955, before launching on our production, there was a banquet given in our honour by the Mosfilm Studio. On the same day, I had signed the draft agreement with the Soviet side, and we were all conscious of the momentous occasion. This would be the first of the series of co-productions that the Soviet Union would launch in later years with such directors as Kurosawa of Japan and De Sica of Italy, and even with the USA. Everyone was in a celebrating mood induced by much consumption of vodka and cognac and Georgian wines. One toast after another was being proposed—to the health of all the relevant and irrelevant personages, connected or unconnected with the picture.

Proposing our toast (mine and Pronin's), one production executive remarked: "Our friends Abbas and Pronin have promised to deliver the picture in nine months. But I am sure once they get down to work, the joint endeavour of the Indian and the Soviet sides would be crowned with success in much shorter space of time. I won't be surprised if the two talented directors deliver the picture in six months."

Pronin asked me to reply on behalf of both of us, and I remember saying, "Comrades, a co-production is not necessarily doubly-fast. It is a kind of three-legged race, each side bound to the other. That may promote international goodwill, but it is not a comfortable position for racing. In fact, it may take twice as much time as an ordinary motion picture. Or we might even stumble and fall."

The second time I arrived in Moscow was a few days after Jawaharlal Nehru's first visit to the Soviet Union, as Prime Minister, had just concluded. Everyone was talking of Nehru, reading his *Autobiography*, a project which I had proposed at the end of my last visit and which had been translated by a team of translators and published in record time to synchronize with his visit. I was told that, on the day it appeared, thirty thousand copies were sold in Moscow and Leningrad alone. By the time he was halfway through his tour, all the eighty thousand copies had been sold out, and many of the republics were unable to get any copies and had to wait for the second edition, or for translations in their respective republican languages.

The speech of Jawaharlal Nehru at the Dynamo Stadium before an audience of a hundred thousand people was the event of the year—indeed, of the decade. No such huge meeting had been addressed, till then, by a foreign leader. The huge public meeting had come to the Soviet Union with Jawaharlal Nehru.

Many domestic civil wars raged over who would utilize the one ticket for the meeting that a family had managed to get. A couple decided to toss—the husband, of course, won and went to the meeting and came back, disappointed. He had been so far away that he could only see a white cap in the distance, while his wife who had reluctantly agreed to stay at home and watched it over television, was bubbling with enthusiasm about the close-ups of Nehru, his smile and his healthy set of teeth, which all she was able to examine in detail, thanks to the television cameras.

During this trip I was also excited to receive the first copies of my own novel which had been published in Russian in a first edition of ninety thousand copies. It was quite thrilling to find ordinary people reading the novel in trams and buses. One day I entered a lift of the hotel and found the girl engrossed in a book. I said in Russian "*Vasmoi Etage*" (eighth floor) and was carried nonstop to "*Vasounotsi Etage*" (eighteenth floor); when I pointed out her mistake, the girl apologized and pointed to the book that she was reading. It had a thick khaki paper covering, so I couldn't look at the name. So I borrowed it from her for a look and was delighted to find that it was *my* novel *Sein Indie*. On another occasion I found the aged woman caretaker of my floor reading it—without knowing that the man who was demanding his room keys was none other than the author of *Sein Indie*. When my wife, who spoke a little better Russian than I did, told her who I was, the old woman was so overwhelmed with joy that she got up and embraced me and kissed me.

That time we were staying in the Grand Hotel, the old hostelry of the Czarist days, renovated in Stalin's favourite architecture and decorations, the architecture in pseudo-Gothic style. For one night I was given a three-room suite which had huge sofas, the sides of which were moulded in the form of lions. There were heavy paintings of the old legendary heroes of Russia, a thick carpet and thick curtains to match. On the

heavy writing table there was a heavy stone inkwell with a stone blotter and steel nibbed pens to match. The bed was huge and ornate enough to have gladdened the heart of the Czar and Czarina. That night I could not sleep for my sleep was haunted by the dead Czars. At night there were sounds of approaching footsteps. The wooden floor creaked and protested whenever someone, in any part of the hotel, walked in the carpeted corridors. "The Czars are coming," I would tell my wife who had cardiac asthma and was, therefore, awake most of the time.

The very next day I asked for the rooms to be changed. My hosts were surprised for they had specially asked for, and acquired, the best suite for me. But I insisted on transferring to a simpler two-room suite without the ornate Czarist atmosphere. It was the dead of winter, and all the windows were shuttered tight, for the central heating to be effective. I would often say that the hotel smelt of dead Czars who walked about its corridors at night.

When my hosts learnt about the illness of my wife, they very kindly suggested that I and my wife take a three-week holiday in one of the sanatoriums of the Crimea. So the three of us—I, my wife, and *Didi* Lydia Moroshkina (who was to be my permanent interpreter) took a train to Kislovodsk (Bitter Water). This was our first experience of a Soviet train. It was not very different from the Indian trains of today because there were only two classes—the sleepers and the sitting accommodation, not the four classes as in India of five or ten years ago. We were in a sleeper, of course. It was quite a comfortable coupe for the two of us—*Didi* was in an adjacent coupe with another woman passenger.

Our car conductor was an old, bearded man who was very solicitous of our every need, and looked after us with great warmth and hospitality. He would give us tea even if we asked for it after midnight. Next day I got to know the reason for this extra attention—he had read *Sein Indie*, my novel, and wanted my help with the Union of Writers, for he has been writing a novel for the last ten years on the lines of *War and Peace*. But this was a revolutionary *War and Peace*. He had joined Lenin's Party when he was a boy and had had a meeting with Lenin himself. He had led an adventurous life, first

fighting Kolchek's White Guards in the Civil War, then became a communist and went to work on the land, boosting up the production of food grains, then he had fought against the German invaders in the Second World War, had been demobbed and taken to railway service. The great novel had been struggling to be born within him, and as a sleeping car conductor he would have plenty of time for literary creation. His first three years' labour had been wasted for, in a fit of hysterical jealousy, his wife had torn his manuscript. But he had divorced his wife, and started the novel all over again. Now it was nearly finished. He showed it to me—about a thousand closely-written pages in several huge registers. I gave him a letter to Polevoi of the Union of Writers to have his manuscript read and examined. Perhaps it was just the amateurish outpourings of an old man, perhaps we had discovered a "Tolstoy of the Sleeping Cars!"

In Kislovodsk we were taken to the *Krasniya Kamniya* (Red Stones) sanatorium which belonged to the Council of Ministers. We were given special permission to stay there.

It was commodious and comfortable like a five star hotel. We had a suite of rooms, even as another Indian intimate—the late Mr Ajoy Ghosh, the secretary of the Communist Party of India, and his wife, Litto Ghosh—with both of whom we had pleasant walks and not-so-pleasant political discussions.

My wife was thoroughly examined by the sanatorium doctors and, later on, the chief doctor, who was also a heart specialist and told me confidentially of her condition. One of her arteries connected with the heart had choked up with the result that the heart received about twenty per cent of the blood-supply. Normally, she should have already died. But her willpower was great and they would try to bolster up further with their water treatment. I told him I knew about her heart, the Indian doctors had warned me that she was living on borrowed time and that the end could come at any time. But that was in 1947 and she had survived nearly ten years after that, only complaining of breathlessness when climbing the stairs or a hill. She controlled her speed to avoid breathlessness and only occasionally complained of asthma which was, perhaps, a hereditary disease for her, as her elder sister also had acute asthma and

her mother (like my mother) died of asthma at a young age. The doctor said, "She may yet prove us doctors wrong by living many years. I hope she will. No one has been able so far to calculate the part of willpower in human survival."

They prescribed certain mineral water baths for her. She would go every morning, and return greatly refreshed. The doctors suggested for my nerves a relaxing "pearl water" bath and said it would relax me so that immediately after I would go to sleep. I didn't believe it possible but on the very first day I felt a strange weakness, and let the nurse hold me by the hand to take me by the lift up to my room. There I lay on bed and had no time even to say "*Spassibaas—Dosvidaniya*" to her. I was almost instantly asleep.

There are nearly a dozen different mineral water springs. They have all been analyzed and their curative qualities assessed, they have been canalized into water pipes which lead to the dozen sanatoriums in Kislovodsk and are available on tap. Open the tap, fill the tub, soak in it for the prescribed number of minutes and feel refreshed or go to sleep for two hours afterwards.

Only one artiste, Oleg Strizhenov, had come with the technical crew to play the little role of the Russian traveller, Afanasi' Nikitin. The first set was erected in Mehboob Studio representing the court of Asad Khan, the *subedar* of Gulbarga. Frolov, the head of the Mosfilm Studio, had taken time off to come personally to supervise his unit's work in India. On the very first day we had an argument about a very rich Persian carpet which was torn. That was why the dealer agreed to lend it to us. I tried to argue with the Russians that we would fold over the torn bit—or have it covered with something, a bolster or another carpet, so that the defect would not be seen. But the late Mr Frolov (who, otherwise, was a genial and friendly soul) had been provoked by some of his junior colleagues. To cut the argument short I told my production manager to go out and get a fancy carpet for one day—even if it cost five hundred rupees—so he went and procured the carpet. Afterwards they were satisfied with the set and the decorations. They were more than surprised with the sets of the caravan *serai* and the *bazar* which was full of Banaras brocades, Kashmir handicrafts

and Moradabad brassware which we had got, from the UP and Kashmir handicrafts emporiums respectively. We managed to construct an old sailing ship with the sails and flags reminiscent of the fifteenth century. Afanasi Nikitin was shown, along with his horse, coming down the ramp from this boat at the old port of Bassein with the ramparts of the old fort of the background to create an atmosphere that he had landed at Chaul, a little place near Bombay.

We jumped from place to place to create our own geography and to re-search the fifteenth century atmosphere. We shot in Mahabalipuram and, fifteen hundred miles away, in Delhi (outside the Red Fort—because it is the only impressive fort to recreate the atmosphere of a Muslim King of Bidar of the fifteenth century. It all added to the glamour of the picture for the Soviet Union and other countries—but it was a geographical anachronism to the Indians. Anyway, we couldn't afford to build a set of a fort costing lakhs of rupees, just for one passing shot.

Our Soviet cameraman, Andrikaniz, who gave the cinema-scope camera to Ramchandra, my young cameraman, to handle, was a most resourceful person. He overcame everything that came in the way of realism or characteristic detail. While shooting a mass scene with Jairaj and David riding up in mediaeval splendour before the Red Fort, I noticed to my horror that there was a stone tablet in which in big black letters was engraved "Red Fort" in English. How could it be there in the fifteenth century? Seeing my dilemma Andrikaniz solved the problem. He took an embroidered *namda* (Kashmiri woollen carpet) and hung it as a decoration over the offending lettering.

While shooting in the south—at Mahabalipuram and in the temples of Madura and other places, he used all kinds of camouflages to cover up historical anachronisms. He would cover up hoardings and posters by placing a bullock cart at a place from where the bullock cart would be seen and the offensive anachronism would be covered. Once, while taking a shot of an old temple, we found a contemporary electric lamp-post and this he covered by placing two appropriately-dressed extras, talking to each other and incidentally hiding the lamp-post! Andrikaniz and Ramchandra, together, got on very well. They both liked, at the end of the day's shooting, to drink a

bottle of country liquor—what Andrikaniz called “*Indiesky vodka*.”

Shooting was a pleasure with artistes who were all old friends—Nargis (the Indian beloved of Afanasi Nikitin), Balraj Sahni (a Maharashtrian ballad singer and a friend of Afanasi), Manmohan Krishna and Achla Sachdev (the peasants who gave shelter to Afanasi Nikitin during the monsoon months and whose daughter he came to quietly love). Of course, Oleg Strizenov spoke in Russian (which was later dubbed in Hindustani by my friend Habib Tanvir, now a member of Parliament) even as the Hindustani dialogue of the Indian artistes would be dubbed in Russian for the Russian version. Actually we were shooting simultaneously with two cameras—Cinema-scope and normal screen—one shot for the Russian version and the other for the Indian version.

Oleg Strizenov, very handsome and slim, had to be padded to broaden his shoulders and to look a Russian adventurer had to put on a blonde beard. Fetisov, the Russian make-up expert who put on his beard, was very particular that the beard put on in the morning should not come unstuck at any moment during the shooting, and forbade Oleg even to talk unnecessarily to anyone. So the whole day, with his elaborate costume and heavy make-up, he would sit aloof under the eagle eyes of his *grimeur* (make-up artist) and came to be known to the Indian unit as a very uncharacteristically proud and arrogant person. Once the make-up was removed he was a most likeable fellow.

We finished shooting the Indian part of the movie before the advent of the hot summer of 1956. We bade them goodbye and packed them off with the tons of equipment which they had brought plus boxes containing the exposed raw stock. All our six months of joint effort was in those tins which would be developed and printed in Moscow.

Now we had to go to Moscow to complete the shooting of the film. This included the earlier part of the narrative which showed the home life of Afanasi in Tver, the little old world Russian town, with its wooden huts and its *troikas*, and sledges, and we had to shoot the court of the Czar where Afanasi revealed his intention of journeying, if possible, to India. Also there

were two or three Indian sets—Mahmood Gawan's (Prithviraj Kapoor) palace, the residence of Champa (Padmini), the dancer, and the residence of the Maharashtrian peasants, played by Manmohan Krishna and Achla, with their daughter Nargis, which I had thought of adding after the village set (built on the banks of *Muthi Nadi* in Andheri, now the heart of a proliferating industrial suburb) had been dismantled.

So there would be nearly thirty persons who would have to go to Moscow—including artistes (nearly twelve), my assistants and editors, and other technicians (about six), a music director with six musicians to play the Indian themes for the Russian orchestra, and half a dozen men and women to dub the dialogue of the Russian characters. Their return air tickets would cost us nearly one and a half lakh rupees. We needed another fifty thousand for sundry expenses. Where could we get this money from? The Russians believed that it should not be difficult for us to raise only two lakhs on such a big picture.

But the method of financing of a film is different in India. Here the finance is given only when the whole negative of the picture is mortgaged. But this was a co-production, the negative of which was in Moscow. We approached several financiers and they all pointed out this difficulty. "If the negative was in India," they all said, "we would have given you not two lakhs but even four lakhs."

When I was in Moscow, Ambassador K.P.S. Menon had mentioned the State Industrial Finance Corporation of which some cousin of his was chairman. Now, I went with our application addressed to the Industrial Finance Corporation and gave it to the chairman to read it. When he read it and found it was only for two lakh rupees he laughed out aloud, saying, "Mr Abbas, do you know we are forbidden by law to give loans—" I expected to hear "to film producers." But he said "of any amount less than ten hundred thousand rupees." But, suppose, I asked him, someone wants a loan of only two lakhs, where should he go?

His reply was, "To the Finance Minister or to the Prime Minister. He might make an ad hoc loan to you, provided he trusts you."

I said I hoped the P.M. trusted me and I thanked him and took his leave.

Then I rephrased the application, pointing out the international importance of the project, and asking for the loan in view of the refusal of the film financiers to support such a venture.

Panditji read it and then said to me, "You are sure you will be able to return it with nominal interest in twelve months?"

"I have mentioned twelve months, but I hope to return it earlier," I said.

"Then go and see T.T.K. today."

"Who?"

"T.T. Krishnamachari, the Finance Minister."

"But he doesn't know me."

"I will speak to him over the telephone."

This was my first meeting with T.T. Krishnamachari, but not the last. Having heard from the Prime Minister, he sanctioned the loan, and asked his officials to prepare the documents for my signature a day later.

"Sorry," he said, "we will detain you for a day longer."

This was a new kind of minister I was meeting. He had a broad mind which seemed to be interested in everything. I told him the story of *Paradesi*, told him that it was based on historical evidence of Afanasi Nikitin having come to south India in the Fifteenth century. He knew about it already and asked me a lot of enlightened questions about the Soviet Union—even about Dudintsev and his *Not by Bread Alone* which he was currently reading. I was much impressed by him.

In a later meeting when I accompanied my friend Inder Raj Anand when he wanted foreign exchange to proceed to Beirut and New York to do research on a script about Kahil Gibran, he knew about Gibran, too, and talked about him as if the dead Lebanese writer was his old friend. I don't know how the talk turned to Rajasthan but he mentioned that he recently had been to a place where women had to walk fourteen to eighteen miles to bring back a pitcher of drinking water. When I mentioned the fact to Panditji, he said, "That's why we are building the Rajasthan Canal. That's how the idea of *Do Boond Pani* was born—from T.T.K. to Nehru to my own receptive mind and, years later, to a colour film.

Armed with the biggest cheque that I had handled in my life, I returned to Bombay, and started making preparation for leading my team to Moscow.

We were in Moscow for four months and this period was remarkable for the World Youth Festival when twenty-five thousand young people from all countries of the world congregated in Moscow. To my great satisfaction, *Pravda* appointed me as special correspondent and the very first article was a letter addressed to all the participants—written in the form of Walt Whitman's *Song of the Road*. The festival contained idealistic young men and women, not-so-young men, charlatans, hippies, drug addicts and spies of the CIA. But so careful were Soviet authorities that, while I am sure they kept a close eye on the goings-on, they didn't have to arrest anyone despite several provocations to spoil the image of the Soviet Union as a newly-opened society. Khrushchev had come to power by then and was wielding it with tact and refinement.

I completed the film somehow, it was dubbed, re-recorded, and one day the preview was held of the Indian version which had precedence over the Russian version as we had a date to meet with our distributors in India. In cinemascope and colour the scenes of India we had shot and the scenes of Afanasi's odyssey across the Central Asian deserts which they had shot in the Soviet Union really looked grand. We came back to India, and for the world premiere at Bombay's prestigious Regal Cinema, the Soviet team came to India. The picture had quite a good press. But the attitude of the average cinegoer was lukewarm and was summed up by a remark that I overheard: "Why didn't they make Afanasi Nikitin into an Indian who loves a Russian girl? That would have been really appealing."

I said, "That wouldn't be true."

His response was unprintable. The attitude of the majority of Indian cinegoers, "Who cares for truth in cinema?"

I was then prepared for the inevitable flop of the picture, but I kept a stiff upper lip and did not show my disappointment to my Soviet guests.

From Bombay, we went to New Delhi where, too, a grand premiere was held. We also held a special screening for Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the governors of the whole country who

were having a meeting in Delhi. Here I noticed some old familiar figures—there was Justice Rajamannar whom I had first met as my host in Madras when I went there to inaugurate the Telugu Writers' Conference in 1946. He was more of a scholar than a politician, and so I was quite surprised to see him coming in with two ADC's. But my real shock came when Dr Zakir Husain walked in and, having known him as Syidain's friend all my life, I cordially embraced him and jokingly said, "Zakir Saheb, I hope they haven't made you a governor." He rather shyly admitted, "That is what they have made me, Bachhoo Saheb"—using my affectionate diminutive. I didn't know then that he would be not only Governor of Bihar but would rise to Vice-President and, eventually, be elected President.

When I remarked about the new governors to Panditji, he said, "Have you got some objection if we have a couple of educated persons in our team of governors?"

Panditji saw the picture and patted me on my back. He congratulated Oleg Strizenov for his performance. He invited me to come to lunch the next day, along with all my Soviet guests. They were all very anxious to be photographed with the Prime Minister and asked me to arrange a photographer.

The late M.C. Sharma was much more than a photographer, but he was the only one I knew in Delhi.

He was an intrepid photocorrespondent who had any number of adventures while covering news for different papers. He once went on a reconnaissance visit on the Kashmir front and was shot down in Pakistan territory. He and the pilot were both presumed to be dead. *Blitz* (for which he was then covering this Kashmir war) published a front page obituary and I wrote a "Last Page" about him.

Two years later, however, when there was a prisoners-of-war exchange he and the pilot were found to be alive. They had been in a Pakistani prison all along.

To ask M.C. Sharma to take some group photographs in the Prime Minister's house was like asking Henri Cartier Bresson or Margaret Bourke-White to take a baby's first picture. But he agreed to do it, because he was then busy completing a series of camera studies of Nehru and had a free entree to Teen Murti

House. He even welcomed my suggestion, as he felt he might get an unusual picture of Panditji.

Next day, after our lunch, Panditji took us into his garden and showed us his "zoo"—his horses, his dogs, and his little pandas. He put on leather gloves to feed the pandas, and M.C. Sharma got the unusual picture that he wanted. He also took some informal group photographs of the Soviet producer, director, writer and artiste with Panditji. Then, leaving the Soviet team to admire the flowers in his garden, Panditji took me aside for a confidential chat on the lawns of his garden.

He said, "Abbas, have you paid back the money we loaned you?"

I was happy to inform him that the year was not yet out, but that half the money had already been paid back and the other would be paid back in another month's time.

"That's good, because there had been some nasty questions asked in Parliament about the loan in the last session and there will be more in the coming winter session."

I was sorry to hear that on my account Panditji had to feel worried, and said that I would never let him down, and then he brushed aside the whole thing with a shrug. "Oh, forget it. Let's rejoin your guests."

M.C. was very quick with his developing and printing and enlarging, and he showed me the enlargements of our pictures with Panditji, the next day in the Queen's Road Coffee House, then the rendezvous of all the journalists. I admired the pictures, specially one of mine and Panditji strolling in the garden. It was taken with a telephoto lens and I looked as though I was engaged in a confidential *tete a' tete* with the great man, almost on a man to man basis.

Many of the journalists saw the photos, they passed from hand to hand. I did not know all the men there. But when I parted from M.C. Sharma, carrying the packet of photographs for which my Soviet friends were waiting, in the Imperial Hotel, an unsavoury-looking character attached himself to me.

"Can you please lend me that photograph of yours and Panditji?" he said to me in a whisper.

I took him to be a correspondent of some paper and replied, "You better ask Sharma. They are his copyright photographs."

"No—I don't want to ask Sharma," he said, "After all, it is not for publication that I'm asking for a loan of this photograph."

"Then why do you want it?" I asked a little sharply.

"Will five thousand rupees be a fair price for lending one photograph of yours with Panditji just for two days—or, maybe, even one day. After that, I will give you fifty thousand rupees. There's something that a man wants to be done—"

"You mean I'm supposed to talk to Panditji about him!"

"Don't jump to conclusions. No. You won't be asked to talk anything to Panditji. But that's the impression I will give this man about whom I'm talking. You need not know his name. Or what work he wants you to do. It will be either done or not done. If it is done, I will say it was due to your intercession and get you another lakh of rupees. It's a foolproof game. All I need is your photograph with Panditji to show to my friend to show him that you are on very friendly terms with Panditji. That's all. Shall I give you the five thousand just now as an earnest money?"

I said, "No" and clutching the packet of photographs in my hand, jumped into a taxi and asked him to drive fast to Imperial Hotel where the Soviet team was staying. I could have got that man, whatever his name was, arrested. But I was running away from him, as from evil!

That evening I told the whole story to another journalist friend of mine in Delhi.

After hearing me, he said this sort of thing was being done in Delhi all the time and not on us in Delhi. A Bombay businessman built a whole import-export business because he once happened to be in the same plane by which the Prime Minister was travelling to America and when Panditji got down in New York, this one, seeming to be polite and courteous offered to carry Panditji's portfolio for him.

In hundreds of pictures, he was seen standing beside Jawaharlal Nehru with his portfolio and in one picture was seen handing it over to Panditji.

With the help of these pictures, he was able to bluff the shrewd American businessmen into believing him to be a confidante of the Prime Minister and again by a careful exposure of those photographs in India, he got his whole business going.

That was years ago. Today he has a flourishing business and no longer needs the help of such gimmicks.

"But what shall I do?" I asked him.

"Forget it," was his reply. "Only warn M.C. Sharma not to part with that photograph."

I did.

So careful was I that I did not take a print of that photograph for myself.

And now M.C. Sharma is dead and the negative of that photograph lies among the hundred thousand negatives in his house.

39. I'll Walk Alone!

By the time the Indian unit of *Pardesi* departed from Moscow, I was preoccupied with the illness of my wife who had to stay behind for four months for treatment in the Soviet Union. The day she arrived back in India, I was at the airport to receive her. There was a wheelchair kept ready for her but she insisted on walking the whole distance from the plane to the arrival lounge—by sheer willpower. She didn't want me to see her in a wheelchair. That would not be, she argued, a good home-coming. When she saw me, she smiled bravely. That was characteristic of her. But on her face was the pallor of approaching death, though I would not say it to her, and she would not even admit it to herself.

When she came home she asked me how the picture had fared and I lied to her that it was doing not so badly.

"What is the next picture you are making?"

"I haven't decided—but I have written a new novel in your absence—*Char Dil Char Rahen*—some friends feel it will make a very interesting film. You read it and give me your opinion."

After she finished it that evening—she was a voracious and very fast reader—she was quite excited by it. "It is very good," she said, "But if she agrees, you must take Meena Kumari for the role of Chavli, the Harijan girl."

I said I didn't know her. But my wife had been a great admirer of Meena Kumari—not only of her acting but even more of her sensitive ability and her literary taste and flair for writing *ghazals*—and so I said I would try.

I sent the manuscript of the novel to Meena Kumari with a note that there was an idea to film it, so would she read it and give me her opinion.

I was invited to dinner by my old friend Kamal Amrohi (whom, years ago, I had introduced to Himansu Rai of Bombay Talkies), saying that "Begum Saheba" wanted to talk to me

about *Char Dil Char Rahen*. Meanwhile Kamal Saheb, too, had read the novel, and as soon as I arrived they were both generous in their praises of the story and especially of the characters who, they said, were symbolic and yet lifelike.

"Of the three girls, what character have you thought of giving me?" Meena asked.

I said she could play any of the three characters with equal conviction.

The three female characters were a Harijan girl, a courtesan who was loved by a nawab and the nawab's motor driver and had to make a choice, and a Christian *ayah* who was seduced by a hotel proprietor and ultimately rescued by "Johnny," a hotel waiter turned car mechanic.

"But I would like to play the Harijan girl," she said, and that's what we wanted. But I was afraid that the stars' reluctance to deglamourize themselves would come in the way. So I said:

"But you know Chavli is black and we propose to keep her black."

"That depends on your make-up man," Meena Kumari said non-committally.

But Kamal Saheb was more forthright. "Of course, Chavli has to be black. That's why she wants to play the role."

I told her that I had India's best make-up man, Pandri Juker, whom I had got specially trained in Moscow and with whom I had discussed the problem of transforming the beautiful and fair face of Meena Kumari into a coal black one.

"What about the other characters?" Meena asked me and I said, frankly, we wanted to begin with her and then take the others. But I could afford to take only one star—the others had to be newcomers.

"No, no, Abbas Saheb," Meena protested, "have all the characters played by artistes of more or less equal importance. Then there will be real competition in performances."

So I was trapped in the star system again.

Opposite Meena Kumari I took my old friend, Raj Kapoor, who would be the iconoclastic *Aheer* boy who, defying caste, would go to marry the Harijan girl and find her hut burnt down and, presumably, she with it.

Shammi Kapoor was to play Johnny, the Christian hotel

waiter who was sent to prison on a trumped-up charge of bootlegging, and Kum Kum was to be the Christian *ayah* who loved him but was seduced by the hotel proprietor (played by David).

The third set of characters was Nimmi, a big star then (who would play the courtesan's daughter), Ajit (who would be the Pathan driver) and Anwar Husain (who would be the nawab).

The three stories were joined together in the fourth story which was of the completion of the road built as a community project, supervised by a social worker (Jairaj) in which everyone worked to make the road of the future.

The three love stories were acceptable to the stars and the audience, but the fourth story in which the nawab, the hotel proprietor, and the village *pandit* would reveal themselves as the villains of the piece, would not go down the throats of the cine-goers. But that was still far off in the future.

An international team of heart specialists of the World Health Organization came to India and the very first "open heart" operation on Nina Maker, a comely starlet and the daughter of the buildings tycoon of Bombay, was unsuccessful. She died on the operating table.

That night I and Mujji went to see Kishwar Kidwai, niece of the late Kidwai Saheb and a college friend of my wife. She was the next one to go under the "healing (or killing) knife." Mujji wanted to know whether Kishwar would undergo the operation, or would she lose her nerve after the tragedy of Nina Maker? Kishwar was lying on her bed. I have known few such indomitable characters. She was quite cheerfully anticipating the operation and planning ahead what she would do after the operation became successful. "If it is not successful—then I don't have to worry about anything." She had the operation and is still living, and working as the lady in charge of a social work centre started in memory of the late Kidwai Saheb in the village of Mausoli. Mujji's case had not reached an operatable stage, but she had a hunch that, eventually, she too would have to undergo the same operation. That was her interest in heart surgery and she read everything that was published about the team of WHO doctors who had come to India. Personally, she was very happy that her friend Kishwar had come through the

ordeal successfully.

The shooting of *Char Dil Char Rahen* went on its own nerve-rackingly slow pace. I had forgotten the peculiarities of the star system since *Anhonee* and *Rahi* and it was painful for me not to get even the few stars (that I needed for each chapter of the episodic film) together. But Meena Kumari's cooperative spirit and cheerful demeanour was the one redeeming feature of the situation. Kamal Saheb, on the basis of one-fourth the story, had allotted us only fifteen days. Meena Kumari was helpless about increasing the dates. But she had promised me that she would come at seven in the morning whenever she was required at nine-thirty, so that before the studio time she would be fully made-up (the blackening process itself took about two hours) and dressed, rehearsed her dialogue, and ready for the take. Once I had explained to her the intricacies of the Haryanvi accent, I didn't have to repeat it. She delivered every dialogue in the same accent and pronunciation. It was a pleasure to work with her and, I am sure, she also enjoyed it. Once a studio gossip asked her, "Why do you show such partial favours for Abbas's unit? With which of them are you in love?"

Pat came her reply, "Why, with the entire unit!"

I took Mujji to Doctor Vakil and Doctor Datey, two of the eminent cardiologists recommended by Doctor Baliga.

They both, after careful examination of her heart, said she might need an operation as her artery was getting blocked and medicines could only give her very partial relief. Dr Datey looked more pessimistic than Dr Vakil, and said to me alone that I should be thankful that she was still alive. This was what I had heard from the civil surgeon of Lahore a dozen years ago. Mujji, without knowing it, was becoming a medical marvel.

Then I went to my old friend and mentor, Doctor Baliga. He explained to me in great detail what exactly was wrong with Mujji. She had a congenital rheumatic heart. That meant that from childhood her main artery connecting with the heart had a tendency to become narrower and narrower. It was also called a "rheumatic heart." It was supposed to have been caused by

a bout of rheumatism in childhood or, maybe, rheumatism suffered by her mother when she was in the womb. These are all conjectures, but the fact was that Mujji's heart was getting an acutely insufficient supply of blood. A heart operation was the only means of enlarging the artery and restoring the normal blood supply.

"The WHO medical team has gone back. I wish she had been operated then," I said with some dismay, when I went to visit Dr Baliga.

"What could be done then can be done now," said Baliga.

"Shall I have to take her to the Soviet Union? They are supposed to be very advanced in surgery over there."

"Look, Abbas," said Baliga, "anything that can be done in Russia or America can be done here. No one can give a hundred per cent guarantee of success in such cases. There is no need to tire the patient by taking her to a foreign country. Our own Sen is as good a cardiac surgeon as the best doctor anywhere in the world."

"Who is he?"

"He is working in the KEM Hospital. He has voluntarily renounced the advantages of private practice which might have got him tens of thousands of rupees per month."

"Please give me a letter," I said and Baliga scribbled on a sheet of his notepaper.

I telephoned Sen for an appointment and then took Mujji there with all her X-rays, prescriptions, etc.

He turned out to be a handsome youngish Bengali and Mujji got an opportunity to practise her few words of Bengali which she had learnt because she wanted to read Tagore in the original. Afterwards, when we came away, I teased her a lot for flirting in Bengali with the handsome doctor, taking advantage of my not knowing the language. Mujji, too, joked about it a lot. But inside both of us was the frightening spectre of the operation in which there were fifty-fifty chances of dying on the table. No one had spelt out the danger to us, but we knew, and the doctor, when he said to Mujji, "Mrs Abbas, you are an intelligent young woman, so I suppose you know the implications of the operation. But I can promise you that I will do my best. And to begin with, here are some tonics to build

up your physique for standing the strain of the operation. See me every week—till I give the green signal for the operation. Then you will have to be admitted to the general ward of the Hospital."

"Why the general ward, Doctor?" I asked.

"Because, there are no special wards here," he added with a smile.

The little snob in me was appalled. "Can't she have a room to herself?"

"She will get the special room—the intensive care room—only for the post-operative phase. Don't worry, Mr Abbas, I will be on attendance all the time—I will give her a room with a view—that is a balcony projection but in the main hall of the general ward. That is the best I can do."

"Doctor, tell me one thing. Can't it be done in a private nursing home?"

"Yes, it *can* be done—but not by me! Maybe, you would like me to recommend another surgeon . . ."

"No, Doctor, I was just curious. I am a little bit of idealist myself, and I highly regard your idealistic self-sacrifice in working for this government hospital."

We came away, singing the praises of Doctor Sen.

Mujji said, "Let us not go home immediately. Let's go somewhere."

I agreed. So we went to Inder and Sham, who were then living in Chateau Findaus on Marine Drive.

We went and told Sham that we wanted a cup of "free tea." We played with their little children, whom Inder had decided to pack off to Ajmer because they were becoming too enamoured of films and film stars' lives.

Inder took me aside, and asked me, "What has the doctor told you?"

"It has to be an operation—in a month's time."

"Anything we can do—let us know. I have got a big advance from a producer."

"You are doing it already, Inder. Yours was the first name that came to her lips."

That night, after dinner, Mujji was reading for a long time.

It was past midnight when I switched off the light, "Keep the bathroom light on," she said which was unusual for her.

She explained as she embraced me and I could feel the tears on her face. "For the first time I'm a little scared of the dark." Also for the last time. For I never saw her weeping again.

The shooting of the picture was now coming to a close.

Our last shots had to be taken near Igatpuri, seventy miles away from Bombay. There was a song to be picturized on Raj Kapoor in a bullock cart and he was then staying for two nights in the dak bungalow. Raj Kapoor was known to be scintillating company for outdoors but I could not afford to stay there with him. Every evening, just as the last shot had been taken, I had to dash back to Bombay where I reached about 11 p.m. and found Mujji waiting for me. She would get up, painfully, and sit by my side while I had my dinner.

On the day when absolutely the last shot had to be taken, I was stealthily dressing in the dark, and was tiptoeing to the door when a voice called and caught me.

"Khwaja Saheb,"—this was an endearment she used on special occasions.

"You are awake!" I said, complainingly.

I went back to her, caressed her, and petted her. "You must sleep like a—like—a newborn baby."

"I will—when you are gone. Anyway, shake hands with me." And when I did, she only said, "Best of luck." I could not see her face in the dark, but I bent down and kissed her and was away in the car for a drive to Igatpuri by the light of the stars.

I wanted to be free of the shooting worries before my wife was admitted to the hospital.

At last the green signal came from Dr Sen. He wanted Mujji to be admitted for a week before the operation. A ball of anxiety formed in my interior as her luggage was packed for the hospital. She wanted to carry her favorite novel—Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe* with her, but it was so heavy and bulky in the Reader's Library edition that she wouldn't be able to hold it in her hand. I had the whole book ripped open and got it bound again in six slim volumes—this was my hospital-going surprise gift for her, and she was grateful for it.

She also took my *Outside India*. It was already out of date.

"But I want something of you by my side. Moreover, now that I too am going on a long, long journey, I would like to read it again."

I said, "Don't be silly. You are only going to KEM Hospital in Parel and it is less than ten kilometres from our home in Juhu."

She said, "You know what I mean."

But I controlled my tears and just smiled.

Towards the end of June she was admitted to the hospital and, as Sen had promised me, her bed was in a corner where a balcony projected out of the hall. There was a curtain to divide it from the main hall. I appreciated that the surgeon was doing everything to help and yet not break his principles.

The surgical general ward is not a cheerful place. There were all kinds of patients, in all stages of all kinds of diseases. Some of them might be hypochondriacs, but mainly they were advanced cases of heart-disease, surgical cases of stab wounds, liver and kidney cases, and ordinary cases of appendicitis. The mortality rate in the general ward is high, because poor people remember to take their relations to a hospital only in the last extremity.

For ten days she remained in the hospital. She was allowed limited movement. And she came to know all the people in there—every day, she would tell me of interesting cases who had died that day. One day a Muslim woman was admitted whose nose had been bitten off by her husband in a fit of jealousy. He was now crying by her side, while she insisted it was an accident.

My wife knew all the nurses, how much salary they got, how many hours they had to put in for that, and the work—some of it involving emptying slops, clearing up the kidney-trays of blood and puss and sputum. She had established such a friendly rapport with the nurses that whenever they got a respite they would come and visit her. Of her friends who visited her daily there were the three "Esses" (I would tease her by asking her if her "Three Asses" had been there)—Sham (Mrs Inder Raj Anand), Sultana (Mrs Sardar Jafri) and Shakila (sister of my neighbour and friend, M.W. Farooqi). Manmohan

went every evening with me—he still lived with us—and Mujji would have long talks with him about me, did I eat or not? What had been cooked for me? Was I getting proper rest and sleep? “Remember,” she would warn him, “if anything happens, I’ll hold you responsible.”

In short, she was interested in—and worried about—everyone except herself. She kept herself so busy, reading or talking to the nurses and patients that she had no time to think of the ordeal awaiting her only a few days away. One day before the operation date she asked me if Dr Baliga had agreed to be present at the time of the operation and I told her that he had postponed one operation of his own to be present by her side. She felt greatly relieved. “That means the operation will be successful—you will see!” She had great and affectionate regard for Baliga, as he had for her.

I was with her for almost the whole day that day, just to give her moral support. But in the evening, she told me to go home.

“What’s the hurry?” I asked.

“I want you to write something.”

“Do you think I am in a mood to sit down and write?”

“Yes—you will enjoy writing what I am going to ask you to write—a letter to me and give it to me early in the morning. I want to read it the last thing before I become unconscious.”

“What shall I write?” I asked.

“Write a letter about you and me—and about the things we have done together—about all our friends and how nice they have been to us.”

I went home to work on that letter. There were many false starts and many sheets of paper scrapped after a sentence or two—I didn’t know whether to make it very sentimental or matter of fact or what. And then I thought about what I should talk to her before the dangerous operation, when her life hung as if by a slender thread, which would reconfirm her remarkable willpower and send her to the operation theatre full of optimism about the success of the operation.

I am sorry that letter has been lost somewhere along with many of her papers that she took to hospital with her. But I do remember that it was almost the best thing I wrote in my life. In that letter I reassured her about the operation, told her

that I was convinced that she would come through it with her heart repaired, and the things she wanted to do and would then be able to do—like opening a workers library, with a sewing-class for the women, and a children's school for underprivileged children. "Think of how all the things you are unable to do now, because of your heart, you will be able to do. Remember that you have to live not only for yourself, not only for me, but for all those people whom you can help with your projects." I recalled all the tender and beautiful moments of our life together and told her that once she was through this ordeal we would have more such moments. "Go into the operating theatre with this one determination. You must live, live, LIVE!"

I drove to the hospital at about 5 a.m. and I handed over the letter to her before 6 a.m. She read it quickly and said to me, squeezing my hand, "Thank you for telling such beautiful lies. But I needed them. Anyway, this will be my talisman. I will hold it in my hand as they take me in. Tell them to remove it from my hand only after I am fully unconscious."

By 8 a.m. she was ready. They had given her some tranquillizers and she was half asleep already as they put her on a stretcher and wheeled her into the operating theatre. But the letter was clutched in her hand. She gave me a sleepy half-smile and then she was taken inside. Dr Baliga had arrived and as he went in to join Dr Sen, he cheerfully said to me, "Don't worry. I am there." I told him about the letter she was clutching and he promised me that it would not be taken away from her till she was fully unconscious.

Then I went out in the verandah and started the period of waiting. By and by, the verandah was full of my friends who had come in—just to be by my side at this hour of crisis. They just shook hands with me and I felt a warm wave of sympathy and understanding pass from them to me. There was Chhadi, her sister, Inder, Sham, Sathe, Leela, Farooqi, Jafri, Sultana. Our friends. The only relation in Bombay was her sister, Chhadi Saxena. My sister, cousin brother, and brother-in-law were all in Delhi and I had written to them about the operation just a day earlier, so that they would not have to worry too much and would be saved from the suspense which we were suffering.

After an hour, one of the nurses came out and said that she was under anesthesia and they had just started the operation. After an hour and a half Dr Sen came out looking very tense and worried, he smoked a cigarette as he stood by the window—no one had the courage to go and ask him anything. After the cigarette was finished he went in again. After two and half hours Dr Baliga came out, and I asked him how it went. His optimism was diluted with caution. "So far there is nothing to worry about. But the next forty-eight hours will be critical."

They did not wheel her back to her bed in the general ward but took her to the intensive care unit in one of the smaller rooms. She was getting blood transfusion as well as the glucose drip, and her unconscious face had a disturbing pallor. I decided to camp in the verandah outside the intensive care room. There was nothing that I could do for her—except wait—and telepathically try to give a boost to her already strong will-power by silently repeating to myself "She must live! She must live! She must LIVE!"

From the next day, the doctor allowed me to sit in the intensive care room for short periods with a mask on my face. She was intermittently regaining consciousness which alternated with periods of unconsciousness. In one of her periods of consciousness, I whispered to her, "You have done it, Mujji. You have done it! You have done it, Mujji, my darling!"

She weakly smiled, she was too weak to say anything.

On the fourth day they moved her back to her original bed.

"How did you feel the whole thing?" I asked her the first question about the operation.

And she replied, "They asked me to count up to ten—but actually it was only up to five or six that I could count. Then I felt like descending or ascending into a lift taking me to the bottomless pile of black emptiness—or it might be the black sky. Whatever it was—it was black and painless. In fact I forgot I had any heart disease at all. . . ."

On the seventh or eighth day when I went to see Mujji she said, "Today another miracle happened!"

When I asked her about it, she smilingly told me, "Today the Bengali *jadugar* made me walk."

I gave a gasp of surprise, "Really? How did he perform this

miracle?"

"He just said I must walk a few steps. When I said I couldn't, he said he will take me for a walk to that third bed from mine. He just extended his hand and I caught it in my hand and walked with his help. I was unsteady on my legs—tottering like a child!"

"Well, you *are* like a child. After all, you have virtually had a second birth, and now you are beginning to walk—like a child."

"That's true," she said, and suddenly an idea struck her like lightening and her whole face sparkled with a smile. "I think I should have a new birthday—4 July—and a new name—Sonya! Yes, I always wanted to be known as Sonya."

So she told all her friends, and every one started calling her Sonya. Now there are "four Asses" I said in the presence of her other three "Ess" friends—Sham, Sultana and Shakila!

I began to collect my material for the "Last Page" from the corridors of KEM Hospital. I learnt that the hospital staff was grossly—and dangerously—underpaid. The young doctors (after five years of expensive medical education, one year of internship and a few years of more experience) were cheerfully slogging sixteen hours a day on a salary of a little more than a hundred rupees, including allowances—about the same that a senior secretariat peon or a municipal sweeper would get at that time. The nurses, all matriculates, began at forty-five or fifty rupees per month, and worked in eight-hour shifts for six days, with one day of sixteen hours duty in twenty-four hours. In each shift there were two or three nurses per ward which was originally intended for fifty patients, but actually there were twice that number, half of them on the beds, the other half sprawled on mattresses on the floor, including serious surgical cases, some of them helpless and unable to move.

As I sat with my wife, late at night, and when I sprawled on the floor of the verandah, there were cries of pains from different corners of the ward and cries of "Sister, Sister!" from the helpless patients waiting to be attended as the nurses tried to cope with the hopeless situation.

According to the figures in the Second Five Year Plan published only a few weeks ago we needed ninety thousand

doctors (we had seventy thousand), eighty thousand nurses (we had only twenty-two thousand), eighty thousand trained midwives (we had only twenty-six thousand). At the present rate of growth we might expect an adequate health organization only at the end of the Tenth Five Year Plan—round about the year 2000! We were poorly equipped (now I saw with my own eyes) for the greatest battle that we are waging every day—the battle for life—against disease and death!

At the end of about six weeks hospitalization, Dr Sen allowed Mujji to be shifted to a nursing home for better rest and recuperation, for she no longer needed the personal attention of the surgeon. She was able to walk up to the verandah but we needed a wheelchair to put her into a car and take her to the Bombay Hospital ten miles away. This was the first time in nearly six weeks that she was seeing, from the car window, the blue sky, the crowds of people, hearing the noises of life of a great big city. She asked for a round of the city before she would be admitted to the nursing home of the Bombay Hospital.

By evening, she was installed in her little room, all to herself, and was sitting in bed talking to a covey of nurses.

"What are you girls discussing?" I asked them.

The nurses began to disperse but Mujji—sorry, Sonya—replied, "We are conspiring to start a trade union of nurses."

That was Sonya all over. Wherever she was, however she was feeling, she was "conspiring"—or encouraging—the working people—nurses or teachers or peons—to struggle for their rights which she knew strong organization on a craft basis alone could secure for them.

My picture had been cut by my editor, meanwhile, and now I was able to devote more time for its editing. After a morning visit to the nursing home, I would go to the editing room and in the evening I would come to her for a longer stay. She was more cheerful for the next seven days than she had ever been at any time during the last three years of her illness. The idea of a nurses organization which she was encouraging and abetting was like a passion—some might call it obsession—of her life. Besides she had plans to complete some translations includ-

ing that of Paul Gallico's *Snow Goose* (which she completed just before her death) and she was hoping to start her major translation work—Rolland's *Jean Christophe*—when an infinitesimal, almost invisible, enemy attacked her—an influenza germ!

She was feeling feverish when I went in the evening. The doctor was called and declared it to be a touch of flu—nothing to worry about. Still he prescribed some antibiotic medicines.

The second day the fever was higher—her face looked flushed—the antibiotics were apparently not working to kill the flu germ. I was really worried that day because Dr Sen had already warned me to protect her from colds and flu in the period of recuperation.

The third day pneumonia developed. Pneumonia, I knew, could be medically treated—and all the known remedies including penicillin injections, were given to her. But it was becoming clear that so many antibiotics had been given to her—and in such large doses—that she seemed to have developed an immunity to them.

That day I got another emotional shock—a notice from the lawyer representing one of my “stars” who was evidently worried about his (or her) balance of payment for which he (or she) had a lien on one of the territories. In exercise of that lien the lawyer proposed, on behalf of his client, to enforce that lien. So it involved going to my own lawyer (whose office, ironically enough, was one floor below the star's lawyer—yet many registered letters would go from one to the other).

Mujji (or Sonya) had a peculiar sixth sense by which, however much I tried to mask my feelings with a smile, she would divine my real mood. That day she asked, “What is worrying you?”

“I'm not worried—except about you!”

“No, there is something else on your mind. Won't you share your worries with me? After all, I'm still alive!”

Then I told her about the notice from the star. She quietly listened to the whole story, the lack of faith and trust that had really hurt me. I was being treated like a swindler.

“Promise me,” she said, “that henceforth you will never make a picture with stars.”

“I won't.

“Promise.”

"You will be there to stop me if I ever get enmeshed in the star system."

She was lying down exhausted. All of a sudden she closed her eyes and a small sigh escaped her lips. "Who knows!"

That was the last thing that we talked about.

Next morning when I went there, she had fever but looked cheerful though weak. I was taken in by her cheerful demeanour, and reassured by her, went for my work which involved (that day) a visit to the laboratory and the editing room, a conference with the solicitor, where a reply to the star's lawyer's notice had been drafted and had to be read through. I skipped lunch but still could not finish all this before 4 p.m.

There was an inner disquiet when I went to the hospital.

The doctors were trying to give one injection in her legs—or was it a transfusion of blood? But the system said "no" to the liquid that they were trying to inject. The pallor of death was already on her face.

She opened her eyes only once—there was just a flicker of recognition and I pressed her hand to give her some warmth and some encouragement. Her hand felt cold, despite my rubbing it. The fever had subsided—now the temperature was subnormal.

"Doctor, *please* do something to revive her."

"We are doing our best. But there is no Cortizone here. If you can bring it from outside, it might help."

It was no use arguing why a life-saving remedy like Cortizone was not available, so I took the slip from the doctor's hand and went off to the chemist round the corner. When I returned with the Cortizone clutched in my hand all the nurses were crying. I said, "What has happened?"

One of them said, "Mr Abbas, we are sorry. It's too late. She is gone."

The useless Cortizone fell from my hand. I went in and saw the face of Mujji—my wife who was born in Panipat thirty-nine years ago—alias Sonya—reborn only two months ago, on 4 July at KEM Hospital—no it was not *her*. It looked a little like her—but it was not *her*. For that life that was always bubbling with intelligence and compassion was no longer in her. I collapsed near the bed where she lay inert.

It was not *her*—but something resembling her—like the lifeless photograph of a beloved person. I wept unabashedly. By now my friends and assistants had gathered and after depositing her body in the cold storage of the hospital Inder took me to his flatlet on Warden Road.

When I returned after burying her, I walked alone and knew that henceforth I would have to get used to walking alone.

The next morning was Monday—the *Blitz* press day—so I sat down and wrote my “Last Page” which was devoted to her and her battle of life. It was published under the heading, “Death, Be Not Proud of thy Victory.” It had to be about her. There comes a time in every writer’s life when the impact of a personal tragedy is so shattering that he has to share it with his readers just to survive as a writer, to be able to write anything at all again:

The death certificate, that cold and unfeeling document that puts “The End” to every chapter of life, said that she died of “Mitral stenosis, congestive cardiac failure and pulmonary oedema.” But I, who watched her gasping for her last breath, knew better. She—and the surgeon who operated on her heart seven weeks before—had conquered Mitral stenosis. For the first time in a dozen years a sufficient supply of blood was going into her heart through the repaired mitral valve, and consequently she could breathe better, sleep better, and *feel* better than at any other time during her prolonged illness. After the operation she felt re-born. She who knew her history would say, “On this day America was freed from the British, and I was freed from my heart trouble.”

How happy she was in this awareness of life triumphant, how happy we all who loved her were in our ignorance of the evil forces of death that lay in wait and struck against her weakened defences with treacherous suddenness. First it was influenza, then pneumonia in the right lung and, finally and fatally, pneumonia in the left lung. That is what killed her, and, in the end, even her indomitable will to live and her almost passionate love of life (which had amazed all her doctors) failed her.

She knew she was dying, she seemed even resigned to the inevitability of death, and yet her interest in life was undimmed. She died on a Saturday evening. On Friday she asked me to read out to her that day's "Last Page," the second part of the "Battle for Life." And she who had insisted on my writing both those articles closed her eyes, a strange peace seemed to descend upon her, and she murmured, "Now it doesn't matter."

"What doesn't matter?" I asked, afraid that her mind was wandering in a delirium, but she seemed to sense the ring of alarm in my voice, for she opened her eyes with an effort and the palest of smiles appeared on her lips.

"It doesn't matter if I die, for now I know that because of what you have written other lives will be saved. Thank you!"

Now she lay buried under six feet of earth. Was that the end? The end of her goodness, her gentleness, her infinite capacity to love, to give, to serve, her love of life, her dreams and her plans for herself and for others. She wanted to do so many things. She wanted to travel, to write, to start a school, to organize a cultural centre for working class women, to build a children's library. To work for the happiness of others was always a part of all her plans and all her dreams. Was this the end of her, of all she was, of all she wanted to do and to be?

To this day, I do not know exactly what is the human soul and if the soul is immortal. I do not know if, in the theological sense, there is life after death. I do not know if human beings after they are dead are born again in other human shapes. But I do know that the essence of human personality—its soul—is its goodness and its intelligence. And I do know this—that simple human goodness leaves an indelible impact on life, that every little good deed generates a benevolent chain-reaction of goodness that may continue to the end of time. We still know too little about the functioning of the brain and the psyche, we are still ignorant about the anatomy of feelings. But we do know that human intelligence and sensibility are not subject to the physical laws of inevitable decay and death. They are a part of that vast, incalculable ocean of deathless energy—call it divine, or call it human—that un-ending process of cause-and-effect that

governs and conditions human life and activity.

And if that is so, then every human being—not only the prophets and saints and great souls, but the simplest peasant and the humblest housewife—that had generated goodness and transmitted its impact on other human lives is immortal.

No, she whom I was privileged and infinitely fortunate to love and cherish as my wife, my friend, my comrade, is not dead. She lives in the love of all those who loved her, in the lives that were influenced and even moulded by the gentle impact of her goodness, in the literary work that she did herself or that she inspired me to create, she lives in the minds of the students she taught, in the hearts of hundreds of the needy and suffering whom she unobtrusively (and often secretly) helped and served.

Be not proud of thy victory, Death, I warned. A human being, frail and sick, gentle and humble, had defeated thy evil, inexorable might.

40. The City and the Dream

It was the advent of the monsoon and the rains were expected any day now, any night, any hour.

I was on my way back to my flatlet near Queen Victoria Gardens which I shared with three other colleagues and comrades, one of whom was Aghajani Kashmiri, then an unemployed screenplay writer, and one was Mehmud-uz-Zafar who had been the private secretary of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru but was now a full-time worker of the Communist Party. A charming handsome man, not dogmatic though a communist. The Party's honeymoon with Jawaharlal being over, the Party censorship was sitting tight on his little book of reminiscences which made fascinating reading and had remarkable anecdotes highlighting Panditji's secular and socialist personality. That is, perhaps, why the Party did not want to publish it and thus build up the image of the petit bourgeoisie Nehru.¹ The other was Sharaf Athar Ali, a young Party worker, who is now (I believe) in London, working for the CPGB.

But to get back to that on-the-eve of monsoon I laid the paper to bed at about 3-45 a.m. and declaring that monsoon might break any moment, I started my pre-dawn trudge, hoping to meet some early morning tram lumbering past.

That day, however, there was no such luck as I was beginning to be drenched by the pitapat of occasional showers.

¹Mehmud-uz-Zafar's wife was Rashid Jehan, also a Party comrade, doctor, writer, and feminist, who unfortunately developed cancer for which there was no cure then in India. As a doctor, she knew she could not be cured but she wanted her Mehmood to see the Soviet Union. So, with the permission granted by Jawaharlal Nehru, both of them travelled to the USSR where she expired and is now buried in a grave in the "German cemetery," where I went one autumn and placed flowers on the simple grave marked by a simple stone "Rashid Jehan—communist, doctor and writer."

The streaks of lightning momentarily silhouetted the Gothic hulks of Bori Bunder station and the municipal corporation building. I quickened my steps to cross the road but just then a sudden gust of wind sent every loose thing lying about the Bori Bunder tram terminus flying towards Crawford Market. The rain had also started along with the wind and soaked beddings were being hurriedly rolled up—including baskets, posters, and hoardings. A tin canister of refuse went clattering by my feet as if it was an apparition after my life. Quite an eerie experience. By the time I got to Crawford Market, the footpaths were magically cleansed of their human occupants, not to mention the stray dogs. Only a straggler shivering in the verandah was occasionally seen, illuminated by a streak of lightning. Then there were drainpipes of about one metre and more in diametre, and I saw a couple taking refuge in one of them. I also got a brain wave. I got into the next drainpipe which became my home for the few hours left of the night. For years I had wondered where did the nearly one and a half million (the figure is necessarily backdated) footpath-dwellers disappear in the monsoon season?

Now I brooded over the problem sitting in the mouth of a drainpipe, and had time to find different dwellings for different categories. The better-off among them—those with mattresses and bed-sheets and embroidered pillow cases—came out to sleep because of the stifling atmosphere in their own *kholis* or *kothris* or *chawls*. With the monsoon, the temperature at last cooled down and they could reunite with their wives and mistresses.

But what about others? Doubtless some of the lucky ones among them found shelter in the verandahs in front of the Fort area shops. Others, chose the entrances of big buildings—I knew a bank which was near our office and, whenever it rained, the whole lower-grade staff came in and slept on the floor, on the tables and chair—and all this brilliantly illuminated by the neon-sign lights of the bank. The less lucky ones made a financial arrangements—by paying the Gurkha or Pathan watchman and for a quarter rupee, they were allowed to squeeze into the bank premises. One day (the Biblical prophets have proclaimed) the meek shall inherit the earth. A foretaste of that was already available here in Bombay any

monsoon night when the proletariat got refuge with or without the permissions of the capitalist tycoons who owned these banks and business houses.

In a flash, or rather a flash of lightning, the idea of a film story was revealed to me. The story of a boy who came from Haryana to Bombay to seek a living, and a Maharashtrian girl who had abandoned her home after her father had almost "sold" her by mortgaging his house to pay the dowry—his honour—to an unprepossessing son of a greedy father. They would meet in a rain storm like this, in a drainpipe like this. The boy meets girl situation was there all right. For the other details and other characters who would also be footpath dwellers, I would require six years to develop the details in my brain.

By 1957, I had the skeleton of an idea—*Shikwah*, I called it at first. It was man's *shikwah* (protest) to God (*a la* Iqbal) but also against the economic system.

Before she died I told the idea of the story to my wife. She was most enthusiastic, despite her fatal illness and even suggested names for casting. It was on her suggestion that the character roles of the mad poet (Manmohan Krishna), the wrestler (David), the old stage actor (Anwar Husain) and the veteran violinist (Nana Palsikar) were conceived and developed. But, alas, before anything specific could be done about the picture she was no more in the city of the living. But the dream persisted—it was positively her legacy.

As often happens with my film plot, I try them out as a short story or novel. In the case of *Shikwah*, it turned out to be a little novelette—called *One Thousand Nights on a Bed of Stones*. I first serialized it in *Blitz*. Then it was translated and published, with my permission and even without it, in Urdu, Hindi, Marathi and Malayalam. The response encouraged me to put it as the little story in a slim volume of short stories entitled *One Thousand Nights on a Bed of Stones*. This little book found its way to the Soviet Union, and there, too, they printed it (in Russian, of course) and called it *Tysacha Nahaj na Kamennem*. The standard pocket book edition (priced at twenty-five kopeks) was sold out in less than six months so that when I subsequently went to Moscow, I could get only one copy of the book which my friend Vera Bikova, the translator of the

story, had kept aside for me.

I would not pretend that all this did not encourage me and when the Soviet film director, the late Mr Kalatazov (*Cranes Are Flying*), asked me if this story would be the basis of my next screenplay, without thinking twice, I said, "Yes, yes, of course." But, in the realm of commercial film-making in India, what is the opinion of two directors worth against such established facts as the producer's past record as a flop film-maker, the absence of song situations and the absence of stars who would be not only too expensive but totally unfit for a story like this.

Nevertheless I was excited enough to write the screenplay in Moscow itself and read it out to some friends who told me that it was the best thing I had written in a long, long time.

On my return to India I read it out to the members of my *Naya Sansar* unit and without exception all were in favour of this being my next vehicle. There was only one slight hitch—I had no money. So I welcomed the idea when the Film Finance Corporation was founded ostensibly to encourage the production of such no-star, small-budget pictures by loaning one and a half lakh rupees. Mine was the first application in the office of the FFC. Meanwhile the screenplay was extended into a scenario and dialogue were added.

A letter came from the FFC that after we had made roughly four reels of this film we should write to them again and on the basis of the script of the screenplay (already supplied) our application would be reconsidered.

An eminent critic (Mrs Kobita Sarkar) has said that I have a love-hate relationship with the city of Bombay. Among the fascinating features of Bombay that I love is the *Chore Bazar* (or the Thieves Market) where old and secondhand goods, only some of which might have been stolen or robbed, are sold. That is always the first place I visit while preparing to produce a new film. From there we acquired the very old and antique time-piece which plays such an important part in the film, a pair of army boots for Bholu the hero, an old railway uniform coat which the hero was supposed to have inherited from his father, an old north Indian *surahi* which breaks at the appropriate dramatic moment, and a battered old violin with its moth-eaten case.

Now I was on the lookout for a likeable young pair—the boy

must look like a *Jat* from Haryana—uncouth and unsophisticated in his manners in the beginning, till he matures in the city of Bombay, and the girl must look a Maharashtrian village girl whom the cruel and heartless city has made a desperate knife-wielding wench. She represents the flowers of chastity trampled upon daily on the city pavements.

One day I went casually to my friend Jairaj's house and there I met the young man I wanted. He was Dilip Raj (son of my great actor friend, Jairaj, who had just completed his work as a socialist idealist in my *Char Dil Char Rahen* and whom I owed a lot for his full and unstinted cooperation). He introduced me to his son, whom I had not seen for years, while he was assisting Hrishikesh. Contrary to the general belief, he was christened at birth as Dilip Raj, a combination of two of the closest pals of Jairaj—Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor. We did not foist this name on him for publicity's sake.

"If you were not already working with a great director, I would have offered you the leading role in my next picture."

"Leading role in your next picture? I will take permission from Hrishi-da straightaway, Mr Abbas."

And so the hero was fixed. When the picture was started one day a real peasant lad from Haryana knocked on my door. He was Dharmendra who was seeking work and really looked a downright *Jat* lad. He had made a promising debut in Ramesh Sehgal's *Railway Platform* which had not done so well at the box office. Dharmendra would have been our ideal choice—if only he had come to me a few months earlier. But now Dilip Raj had been signed, had started work, and now to take the role from him might break his young heart.

I put it to Dharmendra straightaway, after explaining the situation. He said, "You are absolutely right, Mr Abbas. Carry on with your earlier choice. Wish you all the luck."

I was tremendously struck by Dharmendra's open-hearted sincerity, the hallmark of Haryana farmer! And he parted after a cup of tea and a hearty handshake, "Remember, Mr Abbas, one day I will work in your picture." I remember—but does he? Last year I sent him a story which had a tailor-made role for him—but it was not box office material. After keeping the story for six weeks, and promising to read it during his tour of the USA, one day his secretary came to me with a polite

refusal. The story was returned (unread, even unopened, for discreetly I had gummed together pages twelve and thirteen and the gum was intact). As an apology he brought a list of forty pictures (or was it fifty pictures) which the "great hero" had already signed. I knew that half of them could never be produced during the next twelve months! But I accepted the explanation and the apology—and my script back. Perhaps one day he will work in that story of mine. I have kept it apart for Dharmendra whenever he has time! He may, of course, not like the role—it is that of a rag-picker, and has already appeared as a novel called *Teen Pahiye, Ek Purana Tub aur Duniya Bhar ka Kachra*.

But to return to the problem of the heroine of *Shehar aur Sapna*. One day my friend Sathe dropped in. He was accompanied by a journalist-publicist-social worker from Konkan, called M.A. Parkar whom I already knew as film publicist. In turn he was accompanied by a young slim girl whom I did not even see properly, for it was not decent to stare at a girl who had been just introduced to you. She only wanted me to be present at a dramatic performance in her Ruparel College and, being in those days in search of a girl to complete my cast, I readily agreed. The show was two days later. I arrived in time to get the surprise of my life. The girl who had come to see me was called Surekha Parkar and the moment she came on the stage, I knew that she was *the* girl for me. Afterwards Parkar told me that Surekha was really *his* daughter, but he was too shy to say so. Anyway he wanted me to judge whether she had acting ability.

The play was a Hindi adaptation of a Marathi social play (I forget the name after all these years) but the heroine was unique. She had a wide range of expressions and she had drama in her eyes, which was what I wanted in my artiste. I certainly was lucky to be present and at the end of the show gave the good news secretly to Surekha and her father. She would play the leading role in my next picture.

I am talking about all this as if I had several lakhs in the Bank and all the paraphernalia at my beck and call. A few colour pictures had begun to be produced but, of course, I would make my experimental picture in artistic black and white. It

was a simple matter of rupees and paise! As a matter of fact I did not have a name to peddle in the financial market neither a music director whom I had not chosen, nor the hero and heroine or the four veterans who would play character roles had any market value. I sent my screenplay to some of the (allegedly) literate film distributors but they turned down the script, saying they saw no commercial market in it. Sorry and all that. . . .in effect said the distributors. The only thing I had tangible with me was the script and the city—the city of Bombay, with which I am alleged to have a love-hate relationship. I wandered all over the city—in wet weather and dry weather—and “shot” my film figuratively. Most of it was to be outdoors, anyway. I imagined from where the railway line would be shot, where the embankment would be on the edge of the *jhonpadpatti* where the boy and the girl would be dwarfed by the background of four over-sized electric pylons. A remote symbol of power—electric power—that haunted me for months.

Meanwhile, the hero and heroine did not mind coming from their homes by bus to Juhu, just like students going to college, with their notebooks under their arms. To acclimatize them to living and working under the restricted space of a drainpipe, I told them to rehearse their scenes under my office table. There they were discovered one day by a senior (and orthodox) producer who had come to discuss a script with me. He looked askance at my obvious connivance of this romancing under my table. He left me abruptly with a loud opinion of my permissiveness—till he saw the picture and then he knew that, to get used to working in a drainpipe, the “permissiveness” was simulated.

From the royalty that we received from the Gramophone Company (for the records of our old pictures) and from the royalties received from publishers, including foreign publishers, we got together some twenty thousand rupees. The price of raw stock was not so high then as it is now so we bought eight rolls of negative and hired outdoor shooting equipment on credit. We also spent about a thousand rupees on preparing a drainpipe which was made with plywood and covered with plaster of Paris. It was made in sections to make it convenient for cameraman Ramchandra to place his lights.

The first day's shooting was done at Mudh Island which

looks a little like Juhu. While we shot there (away from the literally "madding" crowd) we had two bus loads of our own friends and the super extras, including bikini-clad girls, to get the atmospheric background on the beach for the love scenes of Radha and Bhola.

I don't believe in *mahurats* but most of my colleagues and assistants do and so for their consolation I took the very first shot at a beachside temple where Bhola and Radha get married and come out hand in hand with garlands round their necks. Soon we were doing a more dramatic scene. One day Surekha almost drowned in the sea when she had to stand on a rock on which the mountain-sized waves of the stormy sea dashed. The hero had to rush there and find her as a mountain-sized wave completely enveloped them as they clung to each other. It is significant that these scenes were shot when the sky was overcast but Ramchandra had no difficulty in giving me the pictorial effects which I wanted.

Later, the cylindrical drainpipe was carted to the studio for a few days, and we took some realistic interior scenes to show the people what it feels like to be cased in a pipe where you cannot stand up. Bhola every time had difficulties when describing the big horns that the cows and buffalos have in Haryana.

At last we were able to complete four edited reels (not in sequence, of course) and were excited to show it to the Film Finance Corporation. The viewing committee consisted of a super-annuated chairman who did not know even the ABC of film-making, and Mehboob Khan, the renowned film-maker who knew film-making from A to Z but since he was not familiar with the ABC of English he could not read the script, which was necessary to understand the significance of the different sequences which we had shot. At the end of the screening Mehboob Saheb putting his arm around me affectionately said, "*Khwaja Saheb, aap jaisay divanay loge hi aisi filmen bana sakte hain. Jahan tak mera talluq hai main to Government se kahoonga aap ko loan zaroor den.*"

We waited and waited for the FFC decision, doing whatever shooting we could. At last the resources were completely exhausted. No further shooting was possible. In March 1961 the FFC had "great pleasure" in informing me that our appli-

cation had been finally rejected because the committee thought that the direction was not up to the mark and that in the opinion of the Censor Board the script would not be passed when made into a film.

I called personally on Mehboob Saheb and he said his vote was in favour and the chairman's vote was against but the chairman had a casting vote. From there I went to the office of the Censor Board and asked them to what scenes they had objections. They would not give me in writing but told me orally that the scenes of the bulldozer demolishing the *bustee* and that the scene where the heroine tells about her rape could not be allowed. I informed them that I would see them again when the picture would be completed and proposed to keep both the scenes.

For thirteen months there was no money and no shooting.

Man does not live by bread alone—he must have elections, too. And when the machinery of distribution is malfunctioning there must be elections to straighten things out. The plebian and under-nourished north Bombay—that enormous land spreading from Juhu to the Dharavi slums and the King's Way kemp and the *jhonpadpatties* mainly of south Indians—is one of the densest, most polluted, poorest, dirtiest areas even in India, even in Bombay. It was here that a titanic electoral battle was fought between right and left, between the progressive Congressmen (aided and abetted by communists, progressive-minded socialists and other segments of the nameless left). They were opposed by the Swatantaras and Swatantaranis, the big industrialists, the communalists and obscurantists of the Jana Sangh and the Shiv Sena, and by what is known as the American lobby in India.

At Kemp's Corner there is a hoarding site reserved for Air India cartoons. Every time I pass along that side I look it up, for sometimes Mr Kooka used to come up with really pungent satires. But his politics is of the right, and he rubs it in. For instance there was the cartoon of Krishna Menon and Acharya Kripalani who were shown at the starting point of the race. So far so good. The election between these two was the crucial one in which everyone was interested, if not involved.

But there was something else in the cartoon which provoked

many people and there was a storm in parliament raised by the *enfant terrible* of Indian politics—Shri Ali Mohamed Tariq. Kripalani, as a runner, was wearing blue shorts, which was all right—because he did have open Swatantra support. But the colours of Krishna Menon's running shorts was red and it had the insignia of the Soviet Union—the hammer and the sickle—emblazoned on it. That could not be as electioneering fun and games. It had political—even international—implications which could not be allowed to go unchallenged. There was a storm in parliament, heated words (for and against) were exchanged. And after forty-eight hours, the hoarding was removed from Kemp's Corner and all other sites.

I hardly knew Krishna Menon. I had met him only once when in London where Rajni Patel took me to see him and he had not endeared himself to me because of his abrupt and vitriolic expression.

But I was sufficiently against the parties of the right and their wrong political approach. The victory of Kripalani would be a disaster for the forces of the left in the country. CIA money was said to be involved in the process of destabilization though it was difficult to prove it to the hilt just then. When Dr Baliga asked me if I would do some electioneering in the Hindi-speaking areas I immediately agreed, and pitched in with all the strength of my vocal cords. In one particularly exciting night I addressed as many as ten meetings of from a few hundred to several thousands—including a Jana Sangh meeting where I converted the mistake of our organizers to my own advantage. Our headquarters were at Hebtulla Park in Hasanabad Lane, Santa Cruz. There was a blackboard there to indicate who was to address which meeting. Along with my friends Ramesh Sanghvi, Rajni Patel, who generally spoke in the Gujarati-speaking areas, and Balraj Sahni, I was much in demand in Urdu-speaking areas and in south Indian areas where I could speak in English, and seemed to have a following of the *Blitz* readers of the "Last Page."

Two of these meetings I will never forget. Once I was addressing a meeting in a Sindhi stronghold in Chembur and, as it happened, just across the road from there Acharya Kripalani was speaking. The loudspeakers mingled our words for what I said was heard at their meeting and what he said was heard at

ours. To avoid this confusion I invited (or challenged?) Kripalaniji over the microphone to come and address our meeting for fifteen minutes at the end of which I would take the same time to address his meeting. This was in Matunga Labour Camp where I was fairly well-known for having adopted their cause as my own and written many times about the terrible condition of the Sindhi refugees in the camp. My proposal was applauded at my meeting but, of course, there was no response from the other side. The shouting match continued with the odds in my favour.

The other incident could have been fatal for me. The jeep from the headquarters was searching for a meeting site in a huge cluster of trees somewhere near Chembur (it was quite a jungle then), and the driver obviously had lost the way in the all pervading darkness. At last, when he saw a petromax lamp hanging from a tree and a cluster of people around, he presumed it was the meeting at which I was awaited. Telling me that they would pick me up from the same spot in half an hour they dropped me there and raced back with another speaker who had to be dropped at some other place. I turned back to face a crowd of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh with saffron flags and their symbol of the magic lamp. I knew it was a trap or a mistake but the Jana Sanghis were equally astounded to find the wrong speaker. Some of them knew me by face and started a polite conversation. I told them that it was a mistake all right but now that I was in their midst would they mind if I spoke to them for just a few minutes. I would stop the moment their speaker arrived. I don't remember what I said that night but I do remember drawing reluctant cheers from the little crowd of eighty or ninety. I began by abusing the Muslim League. My accusation was downright. But for the League our country would not have been partitioned. They were playing the British game by agitating for Pakistan. But I said there were Muslim Leaguers *and* Muslim Leaguers. Some of them were camouflaged. All the Muslim Leaguers did not have beards on their chins. Some of them were clean shaven and had tufts of hair on their heads. There were the *Hindu* Muslim Leaguers. They were as great enemies of Indian unity as *Muslim* Muslim Leaguers.

I recognized the horn of our jeep which was coming back

for me. I concluded, "There are Muslim Leaguers camouflaged as Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, south Indians and north Indians, some of them wore *dhoties*. All those who are opposed to the unity of India and strive for their parochial interests whether they call themselves Jana Sanghis or DMKs are obviously Muslim Leaguers in their heart of hearts. Against them we have a tall man who has never allied himself with any communal or parochial cause. He is Mr Krishna Menon. Thank you, friends, for your patient hearing."

Before the audience could recover from their shock I was sitting in the jeep and it was racing away at breakneck speed.

Yet another near-incident happened when I and the film star Raj Kapoor, along with Mr Ali Mohamed Tariq, MP again in a jeep on election day, were surrounded by the young urchins of the Jana Sangh and the Shiv Sena with stones and soda water bottles in their hands, intent on mischief. Once again the adroitness of our jeep driver saved the situation and our lives.

Mr Krishna Menon won a resounding victory in the election but I lost my voice.

In February 1963 Satyajit Ray came to Bombay and I thought of showing him our film. It happened to be a second Sunday and all screening rooms were closed. We had to borrow the screening time from the Tea Board auditorium. This was an occasion to collect all our artistes. The show was a great success. Satyajit said, "The story is the story of *Pather Panchali* all over again. All that you need is a little bit of money which I am sure you could easily raise." He particularly liked the two newcomers and expressed the hope that Dilip Raj would be another Raj Kapoor. That show and that encouragement changed the destiny of the picture. On the very next day I went to the laboratory and secured from them a loan of up to fifty thousand rupees for the raw stock of the picture. Then I wrote twenty-two letters to as many friends, explaining my difficulties about the picture and asking for loans of anything between five hundred rupees and twenty-five thousand. In a week's time money in the form of cheques and money orders started coming in. My great friend, the late Ramesh Sanghvi, topped the list by giving twenty-five thousand rupees loan on

behalf of some person which I had a hunch was none other than himself. Then there were others including Rajni Patel (now the Congress leader of Bombay), then only a progressive minded lawyer, Dr Mulk Raj Anand, Editor R.K. Karanjia of *Blitz*, the late A.S.R. Chari, etc. The total came to fifty-five thousand rupees. But the greatest contribution was from fifteen members of our unit—nine technicians and six artistes—who all said that they would not expect any money till the picture was completed and sold. So I proposed to make them all equal partners in the profits if any.

There were tears in many eyes when this unique document was signed by everyone. We had already adopted J.P. Kaushik, an ex-air force officer, as our music director. There was to be no song in the picture but a poem of Sardar Jafri was to be actually sung by Manmohan Krishna who was playing the mad poet in several parts, and at several places, like a Greek chorus. The recording of this "song" was also unusual in some ways. We had to pay nothing to the singer who was a member of our cooperative. We had to pay nothing to the orchestra (for there were no orchestra). The whole rendering took exactly one hour. So we had to pay two hundred rupees for recording. And that was all.

We had kept the climax of the *bustee* of hutments being demolished by the bulldozer of the proprietor (the Establishment) and after selecting a site of a real *bustee* we had additional huts of our own built which would be demolished by the bulldozer. We set about the task of filming the climax. On a cloudy day, we brought a bulldozer and it started to systematically demolish the huts. Everyone thought we were the police and the people of the *bustee* stood with sullen and angry looks muttering curses upon us. At least two of them challenged us to produce the authorization but they were satisfied when the sequence in the film was explained to them. The sound of the bulldozer was also recorded simultaneously and when it trampled the bamboos of the huts the sound was eerily like the crushing of human bones. At last only Bhola's hut remained wherein Radha was delivering her firstborn. The four self-appointed guardians of Bhola and Radha approached the bulldozer and stood in its path.

"Get out of the way," said the bulldozer driver.

"We shall not budge from here." They said, "Don't you know what is happening inside?"

"What is it?" asked the driver contemptuously.

Said Anwar Husain, the old actor melodramatically, "A man is being born—Bhola and Radha's first child!"

I loved this moment. For me it was the soul of the film when one worker (the driver of the bulldozer), out of compassion and humanity, demonstrated the workers' solidarity by declaring that bulldozer had broken down and switched it off.

The overseer, played by the late Rashid Khan (that great-hearted pygmy of a man!), asked the driver, "How long will it take to repair the bulldozer?"

The driver replied, "Two or three days." When the tycoon asked the overseer, "How long will it take to repair the machine?" he blandly said, "At least four or five days or maybe never."

And just then from inside the hut the first cry of the newborn baby was heard. The forces of life had triumphed over the forces of evil, the legions of the tycoons had been vanquished by the people who were no longer afraid of them. It was a moment to remember, to treasure! And spontaneously the *bustee* people who had gathered broke into cheers.

When I edited the film I added a gimmick to the scene. I began the process of demolition with the words of the mad poet—Diwana—"Woh aarahe hain, Woh aarahe hain" ("They have come. They have come"). And, as he pointed in the direction of the bulldozer, I put in a shot of a whole Nazi tank force, relentlessly charging forward. After that I intercut the faces in the crowd full of anger and hate for the system which the bulldozer represented and intercut shots of the bulldozer with the Nazi tanks. Throwing realism overboard and taking advantage of the mad poet's vision who saw in the single bulldozer a whole Nazi Panzer division, I intercut the shot of the bulldozer demolishing the bamboo huts in the *bustee* with shots of Nazi tanks crushing masses of people. The sound of the bulldozer crushing the bamboo of the huts was eerily like the sound of human bones being crushed. The allusion was so direct as to be understandable to the meanest intelligence.

In the original scenario this is where the picture ended. The *bustee* demolished, Radha and Bhola took to the road again,

silhouetted against the flaming sunset and the electric pylons representing power. But at our first preview, while all our friends were enthusiastic about the film—one old and valued friend, while congratulating me, took me aside and asked, "Can't you change the ending? Put something positive instead of the conventional shot of the hero and heroine walking into the sunset."

I said I got his point but would have to think it over.

In a week we were back for a day in a studio. Here we built a drum-shaped house, very artistically furnished, with a picturesque Kathiawari *paalna*, also a double bed with two embroidered pillows, for this was their dream house. In the previous shot we had already shown Bhola and Radha, hopefully walking in the direction of an abandoned drainpipe.

The rim of the pipe was seen and these two were entering.

Now I showed where they had entered. The simple Radha, the more unsophisticated of the two, looked around in awe, put her baby in the *paalna* and asked, "What city can this be?"

And Bhola replied, "This is no city—only the dream! *Yeh shehar naheen—yeh sapna hai.*"

The frame froze and over it appeared the last title which conventionally should have been "The End"—but (another gimmick?) I put the more optimistic "The Beginning" and have been doing so ever since in every one of my pictures which have the "Beginning" as its last title.

The picture was completely edited but there were no buyers.

In an effort to persuade some distributors to buy the picture we arranged a record number of forty-seven screenings of the picture, one after another, over a period of six months. Meanwhile we entered it in the state awards which had a very complicated system at that time.

The regional committee selected six pictures and (there being four regions) these twenty-four pictures were then submitted to a central committee which decided the first, second and third awards, as well as the pictures for best photography, best sound-recording, etc. We expected at most one of these minor awards—for best black and white photography, which was really outstanding.

Jealousies and animosities played their part at the regional level, and, I suppose, also at the central level. Six pictures were

selected and (I was not surprised) *Shehar aur Sapna* was the *sixth*. What was surprising, however, was that that year only five pictures would be sent from Bombay! But I did not know it and was not supposed to know it.

The political developments were marching along. The trial of Shaikh Abdullah was dragging as it had dragged on for eight or nine years. In early March 1964 I received a trunkcall from the PM's secretariat that, some time ago (some years ago would be better) I had written to seek permission to interview Shaikh Abdullah in jail. Now the Shaikh was being tried in an open court for conspiracy in Jammu and there was a chance that if I was still keen on it, my application could be favourably considered. I took the next plane to Delhi. Fifteen years ago, I had once written to Panditji, under the influence of Unton Sinclair's Lanny Budd's series that I was ready, willing and available to play such a quasi-political role in Indian politics.

"Still want to play the role of Lanny Budd?" Panditji asked me when I went to see him in his office.

Fifteen years had dimmed my enthusiasm and my memory—Sinclair was no longer a fire-eating progressive. He was even suspected in some circles of being a "cold warrior." I had even stopped reading the Lanny Budd series after the sixth or seventh volume.

Nevertheless I said, "Yes, Sir?"

"Well, you can interview Shaikh Abdullah in court—not in prison—that would put the spotlight on you—make you too conspicuous—while in an open court, you will be in a crowd of the many journalists who would be present—and it would be normal for you to ask him many questions—including the question on the Plebiscite front—"

The word "plebiscite" reminded me of the earlier occasion. Then the question of gentlemanly proprieties had arisen in-between us. But I had too much respect for Panditji to rub it in.

"Make three copies of your report. You can catch the early morning plane to Jammu tomorrow. Will expect you back tomorrow evening."

I knew this was the signal for me to depart. I spent the evening going through the proceedings of the case—Shaikh Abdullah versus the President of India!

I concluded that, while among his followers, there were, are, and must have been people prepared for an independent Kashmir, so far no one had come forward to testify to anything said or heard from Shaikh Saheb directly.

This was the tourist season and I was, therefore, extremely lucky to get a seat to Jammu on the early morning plane. This was the second time I was going to be in the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir. It is a dusty little town. Nothing striking about it. A car was waiting for me at the airport. I was driven straight to the State guest house. When I arrived there I was asked if I would like to have a bath or to see the Chief Minister, my very old friend G.M. Sadiq. I preferred the latter for work came before any ritual of bathing. The late Sadiq's handshake was firm and warm. He seemed to know why I was there and within five minutes he issued a Press card which enabled me not only to enter the special court room but also to meet and talk to Shaikh Abdullah.

Armed with this pass I entered the court room and the security men guarding Shaikh Saheb conveniently walked away when I approached the Shaikh Saheb with formal greetings.

It was a fact that *Blitz*, after being very friendly to Shaikh Saheb, had not been so cordial during the last eight years or so, and had published articles and reports which were strongly critical of what *Blitz* then regarded as Shaikh Abdullah's anti-national tendencies. Yet he met me with great cordiality and, like old times, affectionately embraced me and did not display any rancour or bitterness. He looked healthy, cheerful and mentally alive and vigorous. Due to the fact that conversation in court had to be carried on in whispers, a sustained political discussion was not possible. But still he said enough to give an idea of his mood and the trend of his thinking.

He emphatically stated more than once that he had *never betrayed India* and would never do so. "I have never *consciously* said or done anything to harm the interests of India," he said. There was a slight emphasis on "consciously" (*jaan boojh kar*), presumably implying that in the heat of some moment he might have said something which could be construed as being damaging to the cause of India. He said, "I am prepared to face any judicial tribunal to prove my innocence."

He showed great concern for the health of Jawaharlal Nehru,

for whom he still seemed to entertain both affection and respect. But he also said, "One day I would like to confront Jawaharlal as his Kashmiri brother and have a heart-to-heart talk just between the two of us. I want to ask him one question: knowing me as he did, how could *he* believe what Bakhshi told him about my being a traitor?"

When I asked him if his political ideology and undergone any change since I last saw him eleven years ago, he replied that he still believed in the principles of Gandhiji as his teacher and leader. "I wanted to make Kashmir into a laboratory where real intercommunal unity would be developed on Gandhian principles. And where land reforms would be initiated before any other state."

The only bitter words he uttered were for Bakhshi Ghulam Mohamed. He alleged that he was "framed" on false charges of conspiracy only because of Bakhshi's lust for power. He said, more in sorrow than in anger, that Bakhshi had turned even his friends like Jawaharlal Nehru against him.

He expressed his appreciation of the efforts made by the Centre, specially by the late Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri, during the crisis created by the theft of the holy relic. He said in this connection, "*Becharay Shastriji daur-dhoop na kartay to Bakhshi ki meharbani say na janay kya ho jata.*"

I was glad to find that he welcomed the Sadiq Cabinet and said, "At last the people of Kashmir will have an honest administration." But he added that if the discredited members of the old group would be taken into the Cabinet, the people would lose confidence in the Sadiq Cabinet, too.

I said to him that with all the dramatic events that were happening, he might suddenly find himself free to take part in political life. But if that should happen, he should not look at problems only from the viewpoint of the Kashmiri people but of the people of the whole of India because an Indian Kashmir meant the guarantee of continuing secularism in India. He thoughtfully replied that he felt this situation and this responsibility but added, "How can I face the people in India who have been told I am a traitor? At least there should be an honourable acquittal from this court"

At this point I had to leave to catch my plane but while parting he specially asked me to convey his greetings to Pandit

Jawaharlal Nehru. Indeed, his last words were, "Panditji's health is the all-important issue. If he remains well, then all will be well."

On my return flight I opened my typewriter and placed two carbons between three sheets and typed the gist of my conversation with Shaikh Saheb. Not only because I had to deliver it the same evening but also because I was afraid I would forget something important that he said. From the airport I proceeded to Teen Murti House. Panditji seemed to be unwell, and received me in the bedroom. I had not noticed the deep lines of worry and anxiety on his face in his well-lit office the previous day. I gave him my two-sheet report and when he read it his face brightened up and he said, "*Shabash!* You have done well. It might help us but now you must go to Shastriji's house and give him the other copy. I hope you did make a spare carbon copy for him."

"Yes, Sir," I replied, "How could I forget your instructions?"

Then from the huge Teen Murti House I went to the modest bungalow of Shastriji. It was past sunset and I gave my card with "Urgent Report From Jammu" written on it. The diminutive man had devised a strange procedure to deal with his visitors. He was talking to some provincial Congress chief and held him by the arm while the two walked together in the garden. It seemed that Jawaharlal Nehru, advised complete rest by his doctors, had compromised by transferring the authority to make important decisions to Shastriji. When my turn came the little man also caught me by the arm and led me for a walk over the grassy lawn. I gave him copy number two of the two sheets and when he asked me if it would be safe to release Shaikh Abdullah, I replied, "I don't know if it would be perfectly safe, but certainly it would be less dangerous."

Having delivered two copies I returned to the hotel and had the long deferred bath.

When I left, it was not cold and it was not hot. March was the best month for a before midnight walk. Consciously or subconsciously, my feet dragged me to the little auditorium where the decision about *Shehar aur Sapna* was going to be had. I knew some of the projectionists and one of them told me that

my picture had not been received from Bombay and therefore the members and the projectionists had been unable to see it. They also told me that while the three other centres had sent six pictures each Bombay had sent only five. So I returned to the hotel and again took out my typewriter. I wrote a polite note to the chairman (I don't remember who it was that year. Maybe Justice Khosla?) But I wrote to him that since every other centre had sent in six entries why had Bombay not sent in the sixth entry? I didn't mind if *Shehar aur Sapna* did not win an award but I certainly demanded that it should not go unseen by the central committee. I sent him the letter by express delivery and having mailed it, turned in to sleep early because I had to catch the morning flight the next day.

Back in Bombay I forgot both my Jammu trip and the letter which I had written to the chairman of the awards committee. Political events were moving very fast. In less than a week Shaikh Abdullah was unconditionally released, and was given a rousing reception by the people of Srinagar.

On the awards front I was informed by someone in the Films Division that an urgent call had come for *Shehar aur Sapna* and eventually the print was seen first by two members and then again by the whole committee.

It was a late April evening and I was in the flatlet of a neighbour of my friend, Inder Raj Anand. We had all clustered round the telephone which would ring any moment because I had given that number to a friend in Delhi to pass on the important news the moment it was released in Delhi. Dilip Raj was also there. At last the telephone bell rang.

"Yes, this is Abbas speaking on this side."

"Congratulations, you have won the highest award this year."

"What award did you say?"

I couldn't believe it was the gold medal—so as to avoid possible disappointment, I pretended not to hear it, "Which award do you mean? The silver medal? Or is it the bronze?" I knew very well there was no bronze medal in the awards. I was confusing national awards with the international awards given at Karlovy Vary and other places.

"You have won the gold medal—g for god—o for orange—

I for London—d for donkey that you are!" I whispered to Dilip Raj. "We have got the gold medal."

He went berserk, laughing and weeping at the same time. No one was paying any attention to him. We were all congratulating and embracing each other. We were bursting with the news. We wanted to shout it to the world. But I wouldn't let anyone know anything lest it may appear to be a hoax or a joke. We all piled into Dilip Raj's little Fiat car and went over to Tarabai Hall where some Polish film was being screened and everyone who should hear about it was there. From there I telephoned home and was told there were two telegrams from Delhi, both confirming the good news.

"Hold on" I said, "Let's go to the office of *Screen*. If the Press has got it, then we will wake up every single member of the unit."

And so, that night, there was no sleep for fifteen citizens of Bombay; six artistes (alphabetically—Anwar Husain, David, Dilip Raj, Manmohan Krishna, Nana Palsikar and Surekha), and nine technicians (again alphabetically—Athar Siraj—associate director; Bannerjee—art director; B.P. Bharucha—sound recordist; J.P. Kaushik—music director; Khwaja Ahmad Abbas; Mohan Rathod—editor; Pandhri Juker—director of make-up; Ramchandra—director of photography; and Sardar Jafri—lyrics writer.

By 2 a.m. they had been rounded up all the way from Girgaum to Andheri and brought to our place and there was a great *hu-ha* besides *gup-shap* over cups of tea and coffee which my sister gladly prepared at that unearthly hour. Phonograms were sent to our partners while the local ones were telephoned and woken up. By 6 a.m. the all-night jamboree was dispersed, to meet again at 10 a.m. to make the necessary changes in our publicity. We had a solitary hoarding at a strategic place that was above the Irani restaurant in Bandra on the right side of the road as we went from the suburbs to the city. Here, we got the replica of the gold medal enlarged some twenty times its normal size with the legend, "India's Best Picture—*Shehar aur Sapna*—Gold Medal Winner." Just a few weeks earlier another very important producer had taken the space above us to advertise his forthcoming film. By next morning, when our new hoarding went up, they moved theirs somewhere else where it

would not have to compete with "India's Best Picture."

The whole day we kept a man to monitor our telephone. Except for two trunkcalls, several phonograms, mostly from my publishers from Delhi, there was not a single call of anyone from the so-called "film industry." Since our office was in the Famous Cine Laboratory and Studios Building, in Mahalaxmi, we kept on meeting our friends and acquaintances from among the producers, directors, technicians and even stars but received not a single congratulatory greeting from anyone and it seemed very improper for us to stop these people and tell them that we have won the gold medal. The only exception was my new friend O.P. Ralhan who, two days later, hosted a grand dinner for our unit at which members of his *Phool aur Pathar* unit, including Dharmendra, garlanded the corresponding members of our unit. The news appeared on the front page and in banner headlines in the *Screen* and then a few directors and stars reluctantly became aware of our good fortune.

In Delhi, where we reached the next day, we exchanged each other's address and telephone number and promising to meet at the rehearsal, we parted. But as to my special request that the four veterans were no less important than the hero and the heroine, the Ministry official kindly agreed that they would also receive souvenirs along with Dilip Raj and Surekha. This itself was a big victory for us.

I had heard that Panditji was not well and had drastically curtailed all his appointments and engagements. At about 4-30 p.m. on the day preceding the awards function, I went over to his house to personally enquire after his health. Just by luck, I saw my friend A.M. Tariq, M.P. from Kashmir with a bundle of detective novels under his arm going up the stairs. I asked him how and why he was being allowed to go in and he said he was only going to deliver these harmless books that Panditji was allowed to read in bed. I asked him to let Panditji know that Ahmad Abbas was there and he just wanted to look at him for a minute. Five minutes later, Tariq came back and indicated from a distance that I could go up. "He is sitting in the sun which the doctor says is good for him. He wants you to go up." And so I did. Now I found that the broad sunny balcony was across a private sittingroom which was broader than the balcony. I gently knocked on the door of the sittingroom and

hesitatingly entered. Imagine my surprise when I saw the great man leaving his *mondha* chair and coming to receive me.

"Panditji, please, please," I pleaded loudly and ran to him. But by the time I could catch him, he had traversed half the room on his (I could see) tottering feet. Gently I caught Panditji by the arm and led him back to his chair.

"*Panditji, aap kyon hamein gunehgar banate hain?*"

The voice was feeble as he replied, "*Kyon kyon kya huwa?*"

"The doctors have strictly forbidden you to walk."

"*To kya hum doctoron ke kahne se apna culture bhula dein? Mehmanon ka swagat na karen? Kaho kaise aana huwa?*"

I briefly explained about the award function. I said that as he would not be able to come to that function, I sought his permission to bring my unit here for five minutes so that they could have his blessing. Panditji said that whether he came or not, he would like to meet the unit at 10 a.m. on the day following the awards function. He wrote it down in his famous little red diary. Then I took leave of him and insisted on his remaining seated. "We are your juniors, it is not necessary for you to get up even to show respect to youngsters like us." I came away quickly but not before that man of culture had made half an attempt to leave the *mondha*.

Next day, when all of us arrived in our uniform of white khaddar Jodhpuri coats and trousers, you could have knocked me with a feather when I saw the VIP entrance open and Panditji looking as "spick and span" as ever in his white *sherwani*. He refused my arm for help and unaided climbed the ten or twelve steps which led to the rostrum. What marvellous energy and willpower! I followed him up and introduced Surekha to him and then Dilip Raj and others. Now Panditji congratulated each of us. At the end of the ceremony, I gently reminded him that my unit would be at his place at ten o'clock punctually.

At an awards function hardly a quarter of the audience had seen the complete award-winning picture. It had been released already or it was in a language other than Hindustani, in which case, the people were not interested. That year the picture was in Hindustani and no one knew what it was like and what it was about. The "dark horse" had won and it was a very, very

dark horse. Not a soul moved out of the hall (except Jawaharlal Nehru whose doctors and I escorted him to his car). At the end of the picture, in trying to struggle our way out with much difficulty, I was the recipient of hundreds of congratulations, mostly from strangers. We came to "Moti Mahal" where I had invited all the award winners to dinner. There was a scramble for seats as many "gate-crashers" had also managed to come in. It was about midnight when I received a telephone call. I asked the caller who it was. "I am Kapoor. I am a distributor and I want to buy your film. Where and when can I see you?"

I told him I was staying with my niece at Sujan Singh Park. I asked him from where he was speaking. He said he was speaking from Hauz Khas which, I knew, was then on the outskirts of New Delhi. The Qutub Minar was a stone's throw from there. So, I said, it is too far for him to drive at that late hour and he could see me at 8 a.m. next day at Sujan Singh Park.

About the terms, we had a fixed schedule. The picture had cost us one and three quarter lakhs and so we had declared that if anyone wanted to buy it, before any award was declared, we would give it to him for only thirty-five thousand. After the award, however, there would be a slight increase and each distributor would have to give fifty thousand rupees. So far only one distributor from Bengal who heard about this ridiculously "cheap" picture had signed it, paying us five thousand rupees advance. At Bombay three men had come to a show of the picture which we had held on the day we got the award. When they asked for the price, I had asked for fifty thousand and they said that the price should be thirty-five thousand as it was for Bengal, I told them that it was before the gold medal, now it was fifty thousand. So the three of them got together ten thousand rupees which was paid as advance and Bombay territory was also signed. In Delhi, before 9 a.m. when we went to receive the blessings of Jawaharlal Nehru, we signed with Kapoor of Cine Universal.

At Panditji's house, we were told not to take more than fifteen minutes of his time. So said the security men and the doctors. I agreed, but I had my reservations whether Panditji would let us go so soon. I had already done my "homework" about the equal division of twenty-five thousand rupees between the fifteen of us. *Naya Sansar* cheques of that amount were kept in

special souvenir purses and when Panditji arrived, we requested him to remain in his chair and to honour us by giving away these purses. While giving the purse to Surekha, Panditji looked at the cheque and jocularly said, "I hope Abbas has not committed any arithmetical mistake in dividing the almost indivisible amount into fifteen shares." Having given away those purses, Panditji asked, "Isn't there a song in the picture?"

I said, "There was a poem, which was recited *Tehtul-Lafz*," and introduced Sardar Jafri, the lyrics writer and Manmohan Krishna, who sang it. Panditji asked for the poem and Manmohan Krishna chose a piece of just eight lines which was most tragically appropriate for the occasion, especially the two last lines:

Voh jo kho jaen to kho jaegi duniya saari
Voh jo mil jaen to saath apne zamana hoga.

There were tears in the singer's eyes as he recited the last lines and everyone present was deeply moved for everyone knew that Panditji was acutely ill.

The security man showed me his watch. It was nearly 10-30 a.m. I understood the hint and said to Panditji, "*Panditji, ab ijazat dijiye.*"

Panditji said, "Why! Why? I have no other appointment."

"Then please take it that we are very busy," I said, folding my hands in salutation. The doctors and the security men heaved a sigh of relief when we were allowed to go, though it still took five minutes more because everyone wanted a souvenir photo along with the great Nehru. Then the doctors supporting him from both sides took him away to the lift. As the lift doors closed, he was taken up, up and up, I saw him smile and wave back. I had a premonition that I would never see him again.

41. My Long Love Affair—4

Editor R.K. Karanjia is one of those early risers who finish their Yoga plus a two-mile walk along Marine Drive and read the morning newspapers over breakfast, much before lazy folks like me have reluctantly opened their eyes and consumed their cup of morning tea. It was quite early, therefore, when on 27 May 1964, the telephone bell rang at 9 a.m. Karanjia was on the line. "Hello, Ahmad?"

"Good Morning, Russy."

"Something terrible has happened, or rather it is happening now."

"What is it, Russy? Jawaharlal Nehru has not. . . .?" His continuing ill health was on my brain, and I expected the worst.

"No, he has not. But he has had another stroke. Come immediately to the office. Anything might happen any time. I want you to write a four page feature. So think about it in the taxi on the way."

I gave up the idea of shaving and jumped into my clothes. It was the first time in my life that I did not tell the taxi driver to go slow. "Fast, faster, faster," were my instructions. I told him that Jawaharlal Nehru was dying. "Saheb, it will be terrible. One can't imagine India without Nehru."

Nor could I. Paying off the driver after a twenty-five minute drive, I raced up the stairs and burst into Russy's little air-conditioned room. I noticed that Russy, too, had not shaved that day. For the first time, I noticed that there were white stubbles among the hair on the chin and cheeks.

"How is he now?"

"The same as before. Still unconscious." He told me the details of how he fell down and had a stroke, while returning from the bathroom.

"He will pull through. He has great willpower!" I said to reassure myself.

But a newspaper office is an unemotional machine. Deadlines are deadlines. Editors cannot afford to be sentimentalists. Russy said, seeing the state I was in, "Let's hope for the best and prepare for the worst. You have to give the copy by this evening; the deadline is 6 p.m. But the art department has to prepare the headlines. They must have yours now, because we will have at least three inch high letters. And block-making takes time."

"Okay," I said, "Give me a room to sit where I can think."

"You can have the advertising manager's room," said Russy handing over the keys to me.

I went there, opened the room and the windows because I feel suffocated in an airconditioned room. The man from the art department was there to receive the two or three words from me.

"Better make it two words. I suppose one of them has to be 'Nehru'."

I wrote "Nehru" on the scratch pad. How could I say, "Nehru Dies" or "Nehru Dead" or "Nehru No More," when the great spirit was still struggling for life in that yoga-perfected body? At last I knew what it may be. I wrote on the pad "Nehru Lives!" and gave the torn sheet to the art department. It could be a prayer or a benediction or an additional reinforcement to the great willpower.

I gave the heading but could not write though the flash messages which Russy duly passed on to me were steadily assuming a fatalistic tone.

"Nehru Still Struggling."

"The Struggle Continues."

"Nehru Gasping For Breath."

And still I could not bring myself to assume Nehru would die. How could he die at the age of seventy-five? Hadn't I seen him only a month ago climbing unaided the dozen or more stairs to the dais in Vigyan Bhawan? He was indestructible. He was immortal. Till at one minute past 2 p.m. the fatal words came over the teleprinter, "Nehru Dead."

Then, I began the obituary, my pen flying over the paper sending it page by page to the Press till 6 p.m., stopping only for a sip of water for already the news had come that tea stalls in the neighbourhood were closed since the morning.

"Nehru Dead! Nehru Dead!! NEHRU DEAD!!!" The teleprinter message was hammering away at my brain.

At 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 27 May 1964, each one of us, four hundred and fifty million Indians, died, as the great-hearted Jawaharlal Nehru, who *was* the heart of the nation, breathed his last. A solemn hush of silence descended on the nation. The farmer in the field, the worker in the factory, the clerk in the office, the housewives at their hearths, the children in schools—each and everyone felt the sudden chilly spasm of death. "Who Lives If Nehru Dies?"

When Nehru died, *we* died—for Nehru was *us*, the soul and spirit of India. If it was Gandhiji who raised us out of dust, it was Jawaharlal Nehru who gave us life, who gave us courage and the will to struggle for a better tomorrow. And when Nehru died, we died—each one of us felt the fatal breath of death. Life came to a stop at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 27 May 1964.

And it was literally so for the sixty-year old film director and producer, Mehboob Khan, whose devotion to Nehru and his ideals was so great that as he heard the fatal news he felt a stab of pain in his already diseased heart and saying, "*Ab is mulk mein rahney se faida?*" he collapsed never to rise again.

But the late Mehboob Khan did not know the miracle of resurrection. Nehru is not dead. *Nehru Lives.*

The flag flies half mast over Rashtrapati Bhawan that was once the Viceregal Lodge. But it is the flag of a free, sovereign Republic of India. Each flutter of the flag proclaims the freedom of India—and testifies to the resurrection of Jawaharlal Nehru.

From the sluice gates of the mighty Bhakra Dam—"This great temple of New India" as Nehru called it—pours forth the powerful flood of sparkling waters that are bringing new life, new hope and new prosperity to the vast, once arid tracts of the Punjab and Rajasthan, transforming deserts into corn fields and flower gardens. In each glistening ripple of the Bhakra stream, in each ear of corn which raises its proud head to the sun, in each mustard flower that miraculously blooms in the desert, we shall always see the smiling face of Nehru that was, like a sunflower, always turned to the source of all light, all energy and all hope.

Amidst the din and roar of the Bhilai steel plant, the molten steel pours forth in a flaming flood. This steel will be shaped

into tractors and ploughshares, railway lines and telegraph poles, trucks and tanks and guns for national defence, stainless steel cooking utensils for the housewife and sitar strings for the musician. In Bhilai, in Durgapur, in Rourkela and, soon, in Bokaro, the thunder and roar of the mighty machines building a new tomorrow for India's millions will continue to beat to the rhythm of the name that was like a hammer blow of purposive action—Nehru! Nehru!! Nehru!!!

Because Gandhiji once spoke of Jawaharlal Nehru as his successor, there has been an unfortunate and unhistorical tendency to regard him just as an able lieutenant of the Mahatma, who carried out his master's orders with a little more dynamism than the other disciples. But there is enough historical evidence to prove that, however respectful the young Nehru might have been to the Mahatma, he possessed a distinct individuality of his own which, in the context of the national movement, was often complementary to the spiritualized politics of the Mahatma, but was seldom wholly subordinated to it.

Much has been written about the influence of Gandhiji on Jawaharlal, but a proper assessment has still to be made of how the rebellious spirit of Nehru progressively radicalized the national movement that was led by the Mahatma. At a time when the elder leadership of the Congress was wedded to the moderate concept of dominion status, it was Jawaharlal Nehru who, through the Independence of India League and other radical organizations like the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, pressed for complete independence as the national goal.

It was only at the end of 1929 when the Lahore Session of the Congress met under Jawaharlal's presidency that the Congress formally accepted the goal of complete independence.

Of course, if it was not Jawaharlal Nehru, the imperatives of history would have thrown up another revolutionary leader to save the national movement from the stultifying influence of the reformist moderate elements. But the historical fact is that it was Jawaharlal Nehru who literally unfurled the flag of freedom on the banks of the Ravi on the cold and foggy New Year's Eve of 1930; it was again Jawaharlal who, in his presidential address, projected the national movement not in the prevalent religious-reformist terminology but in a new dynamic and revolutionary idiom, ending his historical address with the

slogan that was to become the battle-cry of the Indian revolution: "*Inquilab Zindabad*."

Again, it was he who drafted the Independence Pledge (taken on Independence Day, 26 January 1930) which interpreted the concept of freedom in not mystical, religious or purely nationalistic terms but, for the first time, defined the socio-economic content of freedom in these memorable words:

We believe that it is the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people, to have freedom and TO ENJOY THE FRUITS OF THEIR TOIL AND TO HAVE THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE, so that they may have full opportunities of growth. We believe also that if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them, the people have a further right to alter it or abolish it. . . .

Three years later, in 1933, disillusioned by the persistently reformist tendencies in the national movement, Jawaharlal, in a series of newspaper articles which created quite a sensation, posed the all-important question which is vitally relevant even today: *Whither India?* He declared his alienation from that nationalism which was really "mysticism, and something of the nature of religious revivalism"; he made a bold plea for a rational, secular approach ("Our politics must either be those of magic or of science"), and threw the first stone of class-conflict in the stagnant pool of Indian politics with the question:

Whose freedom are we particularly striving for, for nationalism covers many sins and includes many conflicting elements? adding, Nothing is more absurd than to imagine that all the interests in the nation can be fitted in without injury to any. . . . a vital conflict arises between the possessing classes as a whole and the others; between the haves and have-nots.

And finally, he laid the foundation of a socialist India when he answered his own question: "Whither India? Surely, to the great human goal of social and economic equality, to the ending of all exploitation of today and the near future."

From the *Whither India?* articles, through the series of his

presidential addresses, to the revolution on fundamental rights passed at the Karachi Congress and, finally, to the adoption of the socialist pattern of society as the objective of the free Indian Republic, step by step, Nehru had sought to infuse the content of socialism in the concept of Indian freedom.

The concepts of planned economy and state-owned heavy industry, of mechanized state farms and tractor-equipped co-operative farms, which are taken for granted today, owe their origin to the farsighted vision of Nehru and the constructive spadework that he and his youthful socialist lieutenants carried out years ago, first under the economic department of the AICC and later in the Congress Planning Committee. But for Nehru we might still be living in the age of the spinning wheel and the wooden plough.

And so, as he took a plane to Switzerland, he found "Europe in turmoil, fearful of war and tumult and with economic crisis always on the horizon; Abyssinia invaded and her people bombed; various imperialist systems in conflict and threatening each other; and England, the greatest of the imperialist powers, standing up for peace and the League Government while it bombs and ruthlessly oppresses its subject peoples."

It was not merely academic interest in international affairs on the part of the man who by then had come to be recognized as the unofficial roving ambassador or even foreign minister of the Indian national movement. His Marxist study of history had revealed to him the essential interrelation of all peoples of the world struggling for freedom. He was also becoming increasingly aware of the contradiction between peace and imperialism.

But he was not one of those native anti-imperialists who fell for the fascist trap. He recognized fascism and nazism for what they were—even more dangerous forms of imperialism. His refusal to meet Mussolini in Rome was a significant reminder to the fascist dictator that the Indian national movement would not bargain with fascism to achieve independence.

His daring visit to Republican Barcelona in the company of Krishna Menon and Indira Gandhi which was then being bombed by the fascists, his moving reportage from Europe on the occasion of the Munich betrayal of Czechoslovakia, his flight to China which was then battling against Japanese aggression and his sponsorship of a medical mission to Yenan—

these were all links in the chain which established vital contacts between the Indian National Congress and the progressive anti-imperialist and anti-fascist forces of the world.

At an International Peace Conference in Paris in 1938, he said:

Recently, I visited Barcelona and saw with my own eyes its ruined buildings, its gaping chasms and the bombs hustle through the air, bringing death and destruction in their train. That picture is imprinted in my heart, and each day's news of bombing in Spain or China stabs me and makes me sick with the horror of it. And yet over that picture there is another—that of the magnificent people of Spain who have endured and fought against these horrors for two long years with unexampled heroism, and written with their blood and suffering a history that will inspire ages to come. . . .

India's foreign policy, under Nehru, as expressed in the UNO has been notably consistent on two vital issues—peaceful co-existence with its corollary of nuclear disarmament and of the cold war and all-out support to the countries of Africa and Asia struggling for independence. India's hands of friendship have reached out across the oceans to all the oppressed peoples of the world. But in time to come, Nehru's hand of friendship reached out to other lands, too. And most conspicuous among them was the land of the Soviets which he first visited in 1928.

But some years ago, in a rare pensive moment brooding about the future, he proposed the following epitaph for himself:

... if any people choose to think of me, then I should like them to say: 'This was a man who, with all his mind and heart, loved India and the Indian people. And they, in turn, were indulgent to him and gave him of their love most abundantly and extravagantly.'

It was in this context that I placed my own "long love affair" with him.

Jawaharlal Nehru was not perfect. If he was perfect, he wouldn't be so human. He suffered from gentlemanliness. If he had the choice to be a gentleman or a most successful diplomat,

he would choose to be a gentleman.

He was, to some extent, gullible. Any young man who came to him with a daring scheme (be it climbing Mount Everest or floating a shipping line as Dharam Teja did)¹ he would fall for him. He forgave much to Patnaik, for his early youthful and daring ventures including the flight with Sukarno.

He had been loyal to his old comrades and friends—and this loyalty to old friends often landed him in a difficult political position, open to criticism. He was himself not a patron of corruption but he made himself believe that Kairon was an old and loyal Congressman and Bakshi was that rare species, a nationalist Muslim, and it was their sons who compromised their positions.

Whatever faults he had, basically they sprang from his gentlemanliness, and from loyalty to, and faith in, his old comrades and friends.

Inexcusable in a socialist, he was partial to the smarter and modern-minded princes. Karan Singh of Kashmir could be excusable—he is a scholar and a man of letters—but he gave some other members of the ruling families diplomatic posts. He sent a young and sporting maharaja to a socialist country—Czechoslovakia—to attend the Spartakiad. Maybe he thought at least in the field of sports, there should be coexistence between the two classes. It was only later that the princes had their fangs revealed, when most of them joined the Swatantra party which sought to protect the *haves* against the *have-nots*.

He was not ruthless—and this *was* a weakness in a prime minister—and he *tolerated* wrongdoers till their wrongdoings had reached the limit of tolerance.

Perhaps, apart from my connection with *Blitz*, he suffered me as an “old bore” who pursued and persisted so that he could not easily get rid of him. I don’t think he ever read a

¹We thought Dharam Teja was a Morarji Desai infliction. But Jawaharlal Nehru was too honest and too much of a gentleman, to hide behind someone else’s reputation. He told me once candidly, “You are a fool. You have a Morarji-fixation. Do you know who gave the go ahead for a permit to Dharam Teja? Well, I did.” I responded with equal candour. “Our opinion is still the same. Whoever did it will regret it one day. For Morarji Desai, please read Jawaharlal Nehru.” He did not order his *pattewala* to throw me out!

book of mine, still I found in an old bookshop a novelette of mine which was presented to him, and marked in the margin. Was it his handiwork?

Millions loved him and he loved millions. And I thought of them, shattered as I was, by his death. We were the next generation, his sons, and younger brothers. That included his own daughter Indira, who, when the time came, would magnificently respond to the challenge of history.

42. Flop Film Producer

The award of the President's gold medal for *Shehar aur Sapna* made me almost lose my head.

Legends were started about its success. It had a moderate success in the cities of Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta because of the big publicity which we had received for a little and unknown picture winning the prestigious award.

I divided all the money that I received between my fifteen partners which came to roughly fifteen thousand each. This is an infinitesimal amount of what the stars of the commercial film industry get. But it was more than enough for two newcomers. For all the character artistes and for the cameraman it was just sufficient. And for my associate director, for my make-up man, for the sound recordist and the editor it was God-sent. I have still got all of them, though in some of my later pictures I have not been able to pay them even five thousand. The whole point was that for the triple role of writer, director and producer I received no more than one share.

Out of our earnings we sanctioned thirty thousand rupees for sending a delegation to the Karlovy Vary Festival where the Government of India had entered *Shehar aur Sapna*. We took, besides myself, my friend and co-scenarist-publicist V.P. Sathe, hero Dilip Raj, heroine Surekha, who said she did not need an escort (which is normal for film heroines when they are taken abroad), and so we took the senior-most actor of our group, i.e., Nana Palsikar. After Edinburgh, where I had taken our *Munna* in 1955, this was my first experience of a festival and I must say we all thoroughly enjoyed it. For the fifteen days that we were in the health-restoring spa of Karlovy Vary, we ate, drank, and discussed cinema all the time. Some of the world's finest films and film-makers, including beautiful and talented film stars, were there.

We received the Crystal Vase from the Art Academy of

Prague and a citation from *Rencontres Internationales du Film pour la Jeunesse* (an association of young cinema enthusiasts located in Paris) for Dilip Raj and Surekha as "two of the best and the most attractive young artistes featured in that year's Karlovy Vary Film Festival." The French critic, the late Mon Sieur Georges Sadoul, who had already seen *Shehar aur Sapna* in India and described it as carrying "the powerful impact of the personality of its maker, K.A. Abbas. Its poetry, humour, fantasy and lyricism give an acute sense of contemporary and national reality. This film, by its art and its sincerity, does honour to the Indian cinema." He was among its great supporters. So was Mr A.M. Brousil, the Rector of the Academy of Art and one of the most knowledgeable veteran filmologists of the world, happily still alive.

From Karlovy Vary I took my team via Prague to Moscow, a city which I claim to know almost as well as Bombay, to Paris and London which I did not claim to know though I had visited both the places earlier, and then back to India.

Now the problem was *what next*? We had established ourselves as film-makers of some consequence, and feelers were sent to us on behalf of some of the big-name stars. But here I had to honour a pledge that I had given to the late Jawaharlal Nehru. On the last occasion when I had met him in Delhi he had asked me "When will you make a film for *me*?" and when I had replied, Panditji, every film I make is really for you. The moment your doctors allow you to sit through a two-hour film we will have a special screening for you."

"That is not what I mean," said Panditji, "I mean a film for the children of India that would teach them to live with each other in peace and harmony." And I rashly promised him that my very next film would be for children and on the theme of national integration. And that was the dilemma. Had he been alive I could have asked him to postpone the children's film for a year or two. But he was, alas, no more. And so there was no one to release me from my oath. I *had* to make the children's film!

My mind being full of festival films, I asked my friend Krishenchander, with whom I have such a perfect understanding, to collaborate with me on this theme. The result was the story of *Hamara Ghar*. It was a story for children but it could

be interpreted on an adult level too. The children would find in it a drama of adventure, an example of do-it-yourself. We took a party of thirteen children who find themselves marooned on an uninhabited island. There is a rich boy among them but his water-soaked hundred rupees note has no value. His knife has to cut the fruits and vegetables which grow wild on the island. And the transistor, which was in his pocket, brings them news and songs to relieve the tedium. The theme of the film was that the children find out that without each other's help they cannot make a house for themselves. And when the house is built with socialized labour, Krishen suggested another theme. The rich boy and his two *chamchas* find a hidden treasure which, of course, has no value but they also find a couple of rusty old swords and spears. With these in their hands they set up a dictatorship in which the other ten children are exploited to break coconuts from the trees which they had to surrender to the three bosses. Then there would be a revolt and a revolution and, out of frustration and anger, as the rich boy wanted to wreck the house, which was the product of their labour, an aeroplane would pass over and spot them and send a helicopter to rescue them all.

Having developed the theme I asked Krishen to write the detailed story. Then I asked his brother, the late Mahender Nath (who was the General Secretary of the Film Writers' Association and whose death two years ago was such a blow to the community of film writers) to write the screenplay which again I rewrote in my own way. It was enjoyable to collect the thirteen assorted children.

Once upon a time (according to a fable) the devil heard that in the world of man there were bigger devils than himself. Feeling curious, he came to the earth and there, instead of sinister and devilish creatures like himself, he encountered a group of innocent-looking children. So the devil assumed the shape of a donkey, chuckling within himself: "Let them come near me, and I will give them a hind kick." But he had not reckoned with his rivals. In no time three boys were mounted on his back, while two pulled at his long ears, the rest twisted his tail, and finally tied a string of firecrackers to it! The devil went back, chastened, acknowledging his defeat at the hands of his superiors.

The fable does not identify the children who outwitted and out-devilled the devil. But I suspect I know their names. They are the nine schoolboys and four schoolgirls whom I unsuspectingly selected to play the roles of cast-away Robinson Crusoes in my film *Hamara Ghar*. I had successfully directed the little Romi in *Munna* and had enjoyed the experience. Now I looked forward to making a film with a whole group of children. Soon I was to learn that one child is a child, but thirteen children are at least thirteen little devils.

There they stand on the screen of my memory—the thirteen little devils!

They are (from left to right): the stocky and cocky Ghan-shyam Rohera (16); the lean, lanky and hungry-looking Levy Aaron (15); the unpredictable Tanya Siraj (13) who would be giggling one moment and shedding tears the next; the squeaky-voiced and delicately-built Sardar Jaiprakash Singh Nirula (12) whose long and silky hair was the envy of all the girls; Rekha Rao (12), the doe-eyed beauty who could not forget that she played the heroine's childhood in K. Asif's (unfinished) *Love and God*; the dark-complexioned and deceptively sad-eyed Narain Dattatraya Devanpalli (12) who was just as mischievous as anyone else; the starry-eyed Dipak Prasad (11) who could look like an angel when he is not up to his usual mischief; the beatnik-like, mop-haired Sunil Kaushik (11) who looked soft and naive as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, but when it came to fisticuffs he could give lessons to the Yankee hoodlums of *West Side Story*; the potbellied Maruti who, at eleven, must have been the junior heavyweight champion of the world—but he could swear like a stevedore, and disproves the theory that fat boys are non-violent by nature; the agile Noel Moses (11) who, at a pinch, could clamber up to the top of a coconut tree like a monkey—he had quite a bag of other monkey-tricks up his sleeve; the curly-haired Pasha Azeem (10) who looked like a Little Lord Fauntleroy but who had a temper like a *prima donna*; Yasmeen Khan (8), like a china doll and just as likely to break into pieces; and finally, the six-year old dusky damsel Sonal Mehta, who insisted on laughing when she was asked to cry and on crying when she was asked to laugh!

Did I say that's how they stand in that order (from left to

right) on the screen of my memory? That's how they were a moment ago. But even before I had finished introducing them, with a wild whoop of joy they were gone to all points of the compass, but mostly in the direction of the sea. Four of them were in neck-deep water, playfully trying to drown each other, and must be hauled out before one of them went down for the last time. Meanwhile, Dipak and Sunil were hurling stones at each other, while Maruti the fatty lay in the shade, enjoying a siesta after a heavy lunch. Tanya and Rekha were dancing on the sands, while Yasmeen provided the rhythm by clapping her hands. And the little Sonal? Where was she? She was (believe it or not) trying to climb the conveniently crooked coconut palm. And that was how they would all be engaged till I cried myself hoarse and five assistants had to physically drag the truant thirteen to face the camera for the day's shooting.

Shabana, the famous doe-eyed star of *Ankur* and *Nishant*, also should have been there except for the fact that on the day I was making my selection she came to see me, looking at least a seventeen-year old—too old for my film! Later, when she worked in my *Faslah* she told me how she had deliberately tried to look older and glamorous, with make-up and highheeled shoes for that was the look demanded by the producers. She also said she actually cried when she was not selected!

Since the story of *Hamara Ghar* concerned a group of children marooned on a desert island, and the shooting was being done entirely on location, on a deserted beach, I was always perilously and literally poised between the devil (I mean thirteen devils) and the deep sea! Out of them only two knew how to swim, but all wanted to plunge in the waves, even when the sea was at its stormiest or when, in December, the water was ice cold enough to give any normal person the shivers. But devils are not normal persons, and so they wanted to bathe, dive, splash water on each other in blinding cascades, catch fish with their bare hands, dive again and again to explore the life under water and in general to do everything possible to endanger their lives.

They welcomed scenes which required them to be in water, for it gave them a director-given opportunity to play the fool. If I made them stand in ankle-deep water, before the cameras

had been set up they would all be in neck-deep water. Had they strayed away from the given position? "No, uncle, we are standing exactly where you asked us to stand." All that had happened was that each of them, under cover of the water, had been using his or her toes to dig a hole in the soft sand, and was now standing in that hole!

Farooqi, one of my assistants, was on full-time duty to make them behave. But there were times when even he felt defeated by the devils and then he would use his cane which exorcised the devils in them.

The hardest directorial task was to make them act those scenes which required them to look frightened. "But, uncle, why should we look afraid? We are not afraid." Naturally, how can devils be afraid of anyone or anything?

Exasperated, I would shout, "Now you do what I tell you—look afraid!"

"Afraid of what, uncle?"

"Of a snake you have seen in the jungle."

"But we haven't seen a snake."

"Well, then, you are going to see one now. I'm going to ask the snake-charmer to let loose his cobra."

The cobra slithered out of its basket, but do you think it frightened them? Oh, no.

"Uncle, may I pick it up?" one asked while another tried to catch it by the tail. The snake-charmer protested that his cobra's life was in danger.

Next time I tried a python. "Now all of you walk past the tree where the python is coiled up, and you have to look at it fearfully."

As they walked past, each one of them tried to tickle the python's nose, and I had to shout: "Cut! Retake. You must keep away from the python. You are supposed to be afraid, damn you." In the next "take," they obliged me by simulating some sort of fear but hardly had I said "Cut. O.K.," when one of them was getting himself photographed with the deadly python garlanded round his neck!

To make them look sad or dejected was as difficult as to make them sit still or to keep quiet.

I told the littlest of the devils, Sonal Mehta, "Now, in this scene, you must cry."

"I won't cry," she firmly informed me.

"But you must—do *oon—ooooon—ooooon!*"

"I won't."

"Please, Sonal, imagine your daddy has beaten you."

"My daddy never beats me."

"All right, your mummy has beaten you!"

"My mummy has not beaten me."

"*Aray*, do as I say—cry—weep—shed tears—do *oon—ooooon—ooooon.*" I was now getting desperate.

"I won't, I won't, I won't," the little devil repeated, chuckling all the time, even clapping her hands.

She was laughing, and I was on the verge of tears.

"Sonal!" I shouted like a military commander, "you have to do as I tell you. Look serious and sad. You are all alone on this island. You are afraid. You are thinking of your mummy and daddy. You are hungry. You have nothing to eat. . . ."

That gave her an idea.

"Chocolate," she said simply—the little blackmailer!

"All right," I agreed, "Chocolate."

"And *naryal pani!*"

"Yes, *naryal pani*, too. But after the shot."

"No. Now. Only then I cry."

So the chocolate bar was ordered. She munched it leisurely, then drank coconut water, only then did she relent.

"Now I cry," And she did!

Devils must always be up to devilish mischief, or they wouldn't be devils. Everyday as I reached the location (the devils were always there before me), I expected and duly received a first aid report: this one had cut his hand fooling about with a cactus plant; that one had cut the soles of his feet running barefoot on the sharp-edged coral rocks, one fell down from a palm tree and has bruised his back. (In sixty-three days of shooting, we used up the three bottles of iodine and at least a hundred pieces of medicated adhesive tapes, and on three occasions the doctor had to be summoned to give anti-tetanus injections). X reported that Y beat him up. Y defended himself saying X had abused him. I got so used to these early morning reports that if I did not receive them I was quite disturbed.

So one day when Sunil and Dipak, who were otherwise always quarrelling, both greeted me in a duet, "Uncle, today we have not done anything," I was more than surprised.

"No quarrels?"

"No, uncle."

"No fights?"

"No, uncle."

"No one even abused someone else?"

"No, uncle."

"That's wonderful. *Shabash*. You all deserve a prize." Little did I realise how cleverly I was being trapped.

"Uncle, can we all have a coconut each to drink?"

"Well, yes, all right. Go ahead!"

"Thank you, uncle. We have had *naryal pani* already. We knew you would never say 'No'."

"All right, then, so that is finished. Let's start work."

"Uncle!"

"Now, what is it?"

"Can we have one more coconut each?"

"No, You can't. . . ."

"But you just promised. . . ."

"All right but. . . ." They never waited to hear the "But." They were already round the *naryal pani* vendor, and their whoops of joy were like the war-cries of African headhunters.

That day the *naryal paniwalla* presented a bill of twenty-six rupees for fifty-two coconuts consumed by the children. The thirteen devils, of course, could not be expected to keep count with arithmetical precision.

At last came the day when the last shooting was done. I heaved a sigh of relief, as I called the parents of all the little devils and asked them to sign receipts for the safe return of their respective little devils—all in one piece! Now, I told myself, I am rid of them. Now I can sleep in peace.

But I couldn't. For a long time I lay awake thinking of the sixty-three days I had been haunted by the thirteen little devils. They had been a nuisance, no doubt, they had caused many anxious moments and been the source of endless worry. But hadn't it been fun, too? Life, indeed, would be dull without their daily devilry.

The completed film which we screened for children and adults was unanimously voted as most successful. The children found in it what they were looking for. High drama and adventure. The adults could take it as an allegory on national integration. The house that the children built with cooperative labour was *India*. And the children represented all the major communities and regional groups. They had to work together to build India and to defend India.

There was a Prime Minister's gold medal instituted some years ago in the national awards. We were absolutely certain to win it, so much so that we delayed the release of the film till we got the medal. About the President's gold medal for *Shehar aur Sapna* we were nervous and uncertain upto the last. After all there were other and more formidable film-makers like Satyajit Ray and Bimal Roy. But this time we were over-confident for no director of any consequence had made a children's film. Yet when the results came out the committee refused to even recognize it as a children's film. And that was that!

That year there was an international film festival in Delhi with Satyajit Ray as the chairman of the jury. I was the only other Indian to be a member of the jury. Of the other members several were known to me already. The veterans like Brousil and Georges Sadoul, the Russian director and my old friend Kalatozov and the beautiful Magda from Egypt. It was my first experience of being on the jury—my head reeled with all the films one saw every day—and our discussions were long and arduous for at least five or six languages were being spoken and every word had to be translated and re-translated. It was not easy to come to a decision. We almost did not give the Golden Peacock till I suggested a Ceylonese entry *Gumpralia* which had suffered because the director was not there and the reels of the film, which were numbered in Ceylonese, were scrambled in projection. So many of them had to be run again. But I had found in it a quaint lyricism which is the hallmark of Lester James Peries whom I later met, along with his wife who was a film editor, and we became friends. There was a discussion and I was glad to find more and more members coming to my viewpoint. At last it was decided. But the award went to the producer who had put in his money and

not to James Peries who, at that time, could not afford to be present.

The festival was notable for the emergence of a young Indian film-maker who had been till then an assistant to the German documentarist Paul Zils. He was Sukhdev Singh, a Punjabi. With no money, living in a *chawl* in Matunga, he had made a two-reel documentary "...And Miles to Go," a searing document of social protest. By unanimous vote it was given the Bengal Tiger, an award given by a Calcutta film society for the most unusual and unconventional film. That was the birth of a powerful film-maker, especially of documentaries. S. Sukhdev, as he is now called, is the leading documentarist of social protest who has now come into money and lives in affluent circumstances.

Behind the decisions to give these awards and behind the entire festival was the remarkable personality of Mrs Indira Gandhi who was then our Minister of Information and Broadcasting. She had a developed and cultivated taste for art films. A long association with the Federation of Film Societies, of which she was the vice-president (with Satyajit Ray as the president), and later as president, she showed that here was a minister who understood what she was doing. She gave a reception to the delegates and everyone was impressed by her talk and her manner. Georges Sadoul said to me in an aside something in fluent French and when I reminded him that *Je ne parle pas Francaise* (I don't speak French) he translated it in his poor English. "This lady—she no good Minister of Information. She make very good Prime Minister. No?"

I said, "Yes, Professor."

There was no Nehru to see and appreciate *Hamara Ghar* and so the next best thing was to show it to Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Prime Minister, who was about to complete one year in office.

I invited him to the Delhi premiere at the prestigious Plaza theatre, and he came fifteen minutes earlier, when we were not expecting him. A modest-looking car drove up into the portico and there he was—the Prime Minister of India—the successor of Jawaharlal Nehru.

While I showed him the film seated between him and Mrs

Shastri, I was impressed by his modesty bordering on humility. I had met him only once before when I went to see him in connection with Shaikh Abdullah's interview. He remembered it, though the situation had changed again. His reactions to the scenes were so childlike that it could have been a child sitting next to me.

In the interval he made a very good speech, congratulating us for venturing into a "good" film for the children. He sat through the entire film, and the journalist in me requested him for an interview for *Blitz* the next day. He said I should see him in his office at 6 p.m.

The first impression that I had the next day when I went to see him was that Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri felt lonely without his friend, philosopher and guide, Jawaharlal Nehru. But he also felt that it was his good fortune to have worked with Nehru, and now it was his privilege and his sacred duty to "work with all our heart and soul for the fulfilment of the wishes and dreams of Jawaharlal Nehru."

The Prime Minister also paid a striking tribute to the patriotic devotion of the peace-loving Soviet people and their leaders whom he met recently and who "talked to us with great frankness, straight from the heart."

"Shastriji," I asked, "we are now approaching the first anniversary of the death of our beloved leader, Jawaharlal Nehru. To mark this anniversary, *Blitz* is publishing a special supplement to assess the state of the nation during the last 'One year without Nehru.' On this sad and solemn occasion, what are your thoughts and feelings? What would you like to say to the nation?"

"In the absence of Panditji," he replied, "I have an overwhelming feeling of loneliness. Sometimes, even now, one likes to think he is still in our midst. In the last seventeen years he made India what she is, raised the stature of India in the comity of nations. To the world at large he gave the message of peace. That message is vitally pertinent even today. On world peace depends even our own growth and development.

"It is very regrettable that today in the world, and specially in certain regions of Asia, there should be tension and conflict. This must be ended at all cost. And we will try our best to prevent these tensions and conflict developing into another

war. But how far we will succeed depends not so much on us but on others and their response to our peace efforts. And yet we must persist in our efforts for peace, for we are a peace-loving country and we must pursue the peaceful policies laid down by Panditji." He was obviously referring to the Indo-Pak tension.

"That was, indeed, the Nehru approach in international affairs. Can you please outline what we must do to fulfil the dreams of Nehru in the context of our internal affairs?"

"We have always to keep that aim of his before us," said Shastriji, "and to exert with all our might to create conditions for the building of a new, just and equitable society, and thus to open a new chapter in the history of our people. Alas, today the great personality of Panditji and the universal respect he enjoyed are no longer available to us, to guide us and inspire us. And yet we are happy that we had the good fortune to work with him, and now we have the opportunity to work with all our heart and soul, for the fulfilment of his wishes and his dreams."

"One of these acute problems, I suppose, has been created by the Pakistan aggression in the Rann of Kutch?"

"Yes," said Shastriji, "and that has been most regrettable. We never expected that there would be such a flagrant attack from the Pakistan side. While actually both India and Pakistan need to live in peace to develop their respective countries, these attacks and aggressions cause a hindrance to the development of both the countries. We feel that the people of Pakistan should search their hearts and quietly ponder whether what they did was justifiable. But the people of India have to learn to face these difficulties with courage and fortitude. I hope we will rise to the occasion, and every man, woman and child will stand shoulder to shoulder for the defence of our homeland."

"Shastriji," I broached another topic, "on this visit to Delhi I have seen some very virulently-worded posters brought out by some communal organizations. It appears that, taking advantage of the situation created by Pakistani aggression, communal forces in our own country have begun to assert themselves and threaten to poison the atmosphere with their vicious propaganda. What do you feel about this danger?"

"In the present situation," he said, "more than anything else, we need to strengthen the secular base of our republic by

maintaining inter-communal harmony and national unity.

"In this context, I particularly want to emphasize the importance of Hindu-Muslim unity. I know, and I want to say, that if the country is faced with any aggression, the Muslims of India will fully participate in the defence of their motherland, and shall not be found wanting."

Here was a large-hearted little man who was now saying: "I know that there are communalists in our country who, on and off, keep on raising communal slogans and inflame fanatical feelings. But I am firmly convinced that the large majority of our people, belonging to different communities, do not approve of such things and want to live in amity and peace."

From India, I took the conversation to the Soviet Union which he had recently visited. "What characteristic of the Soviet people, or of their life, impressed you most?"

"What impressed me most was the Soviet people's indomitable spirit of patriotism. In one city of Leningrad alone half a million died during the war and yet they did not surrender to Hitler. With the same courage and patriotism which they displayed during the war, they have been reconstructing their country, and are still engaged in this task of reconstruction. I have no words to praise their courage and their devotion to their country."

Physically, the man was little but I had a feeling that when the time came for large decisions he would not be found wanting. With that confidence I drove to the cinema where our *Hamara Ghar* was running.

Except for Delhi and Bombay the economic picture of my new film was again a disaster. In Bombay the picture was liked by Miss Madhuri Shah, the education officer of the corporation, and was recommended to all the municipal schools in Bombay. We had good block-bookings but that meant that the matinees and the first shows were full of eager children. The late night show was almost all deserted. The picture ran for several weeks but almost all the income went to pay the rent. But, meanwhile, we were informed that at the International Festival of Children's Films, where we had just sent the film with nobody to accompany it, to Gottwaldov in Czechoslovakia, it won the second prize. We had no information who got the first prize,

Anyway in later years it was a consolation for a film which was branded as "not a children's film at all," in India, it won two more second prizes—at Gijon (Spain) and at Santa Barbara (USA) where, of course, I was present.

What next was the problem. Again I turned to a friend, Inder Raj Anand, who, out of his experiences of Hyderabad State, had written a most moving story about the decline of feudalism, called *Aasman Mahal*. Prithviraj Kapoor, tall, heavybodied, with a leonine face, was the obvious choice to play the central role of the feudal lord. For the romantic leads, I took the *Shehar aur Sapna* pair, Dilip Raj and Surekha, the latter duly de-glamourized, a cycle-rickshaw driver's daughter. Dilip Raj would be the rebellious son of the Nawab in love with a young teacher who was the rickshaw driver's daughter.

We made this film in Hyderabad in the decrepit house of a nawab, who was glad to get from us five thousand rupees per month which would help him to get the place painted and whitewashed. We got a little money from a financier in Madras who was willing to give us one and a half lakhs rupees, charging us only twenty-five thousand by way of interest. Rarely does such a financier invest his money in films. With all sorts of credits and delayed payments we were able to make the picture within the limited budget. Towards the end of the story Prithviraj in all his tardy glory is going down the stairs, for the first time in years, when he has a stroke. He lies helpless, paralyzed. An obvious symbol of feudalism, helpless against the advancing forces of capitalism.

I enjoyed making this picture. It was shot virtually nonstop on one particular occasion. All of us stayed in a rented bungalow near the palace, all of us sleeping on the ground, and eating together. A sort of commune. To encourage the members of my unit to give up their drinking habit I took a vow not to touch meat throughout the three months that we were in Hyderabad.

One day we were invited to dinner by a *chhote* nawab saheb and I sent word in advance that I was, for the time being, vegetarian and permanently teetotaler. The message got distorted somewhere in conveyance and when I arrived I was offered all kinds of drinks from sherry and port, and whisky and vodka, not to mention cocktails like a Bloody Mary. Now,

during shooting, I do not generally eat lunch, preferring to have a high tea at the end of it. That day there was no lunch and no tea for we were in a hurry not to be delayed for dinner. But before dinner were served the drinks, and I was dying for a cup of tea. My host, however, continued to offer me every kind of drink except tea. But there is a limit to the Coca Cola one can drink. The host got my permission for my unit members to drink the choice victuals that has been ordered for us. It was not really necessary for they were already at the bar. I would have given anything for a cup of tea and some sandwiches. But they were pressing champagne on me, and nobody thought of tea or coffee. The dinner was served at 10.30 p.m. There were five kinds of chicken, four varieties of *kababs*, two kinds of fish fried and curried, and aromatic *biryani*, the fumes from it were rising to tantalize my nostrils. But the only two things which could be called vegetarian were a platter full of plain boiled rice, and a bowl of tamarind soup. That's all.

I ate the tamarind soup with rice and had a few mouthfuls. Then came the explanation "We are sorry, Mr Abbas. But our vegetarian cook happened to be on leave when we received your message. Otherwise he could have prepared vegetarian dishes to match every non-vegetarian item here, looking exactly the same." I assured them that the tamarind soup with rice was my favourite.

After that night I came to know that the oath of not taking liquor was observed more in its breach than in its observance. I shouted and screamed at the whole unit but it was too late. Within three days we would end our work in Hyderabad and would be on our way back to Bombay.

By the time we returned at midnight, our commune kitchen was closed, and I could hardly sleep that night on an empty stomach.

The first Indo-Pak War took place while we were in Hyderabad. I duly attended a mass meeting presided over by the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and made a speech announcing a donation of one thousand rupees to the widow of *Hawaladar* Abdul Hameed. The theme of my speech was the two Ayub Khans. One of them was the dictator of Pakistan and the other was a simple tank man of secular India. The battle was between these two men and the ideals and ideas

symbolized by them.

And, from Hyderabad, I rushed a "Last Page" which was "My Testament of Faith—I Hate War, But I Will Fight to Defend My Country." This is how it began. . . .

After that there was an analysis of the aggressive aim of the rulers of Pakistan and a condemnation of attempts to make a Hindu Pakistan of our India. And this is how it ended. . . .

"I still hate war. But I am pledged to take up my pen—and when necessary my gun—to defend my country against all its enemies."

Back in Bombay we edited the film and saw a preview with friends and business people. Everybody's first reaction was that it was a brilliant film, that it would also be a hit, that *Aasman Mahal* would raise us to the skies. I was not so easily taken in. Two friends of ours thought I was a fool to expect only one and a quarter lakh rupees per territory, that they would buy it from us for Delhi-UP territory for one and three-quarter lakh rupees and would sell it to a buyer for two and a quarter lakh rupees thus ensuring profits all round. I knew that both my friends, between them, didn't possess one thousand seven hundred and fifty rupees but nevertheless their praise was genuine and what they were saying was what they would do if they were in business. So I played along with them, held a few previews for their "parties" and stuck to my original demand of one and a quarter lakh rupees (royalty). None of the distributors who came said the film was not bad, each of them said they would let us know their offer, but none of them did. We were keen to release it in Delhi and UP, imagining that the courtly Urdu language of the nawabs of Hyderabad, which we had used in the film, would be better appreciated in the north. So when one distributor came forward and offered us one and a quarter lakh rupees royalty, we promptly said "yes." He fixed some date for the national premiere to be held at Delhi, and he gave us some advance which helped us to pay for the publicity and posters, etc., which we had to give them. On their part they started giving previews to members of their families and it seemed that someone among their relations did not think that the film would be a hit. So, one week before when they had to take delivery of the prints they offered us twenty-

five thousand rupees less. They said they were rather short of money and would make it up within a month after the picture was a hit in Delhi. I had no choice but to agree to the lesser amount though I knew that was the final price. I would get no more.

The story writer of the film, Inder Raj Anand, was then in the United States dealing with some producers and agents to sell his script of *Kahil Gibran*. I sent him a cablegram inviting him to the Delhi premiere. The press show in Delhi was a great success. At least the critics were raving about it, congratulating me and Inder Raj Anand (who had arrived just in time, Hollywood style).

It was enough to inflate my ego and vanity, but the disillusionment was soon to come.

The first few shows were full of what is called in the film distributors' language, the "gentry of Delhi" and they congratulated us, especially the magnificent performance of Prithviraj ji who had really lived his role as the doomed nawab. We sent off telegrams to Prithviraj conveying this good news but the next day what had to happen happened. There was an appreciable drop in the audience. Now came the lumpen proletariat and, by mingling with the audience, which of course did not know me, I could hear their comments. What they could not appreciate was my "black" heroine. One man said, "*Sala is ne Meena Kumari ko bhi kala banaya tha.*" Another said, "*Vyjayanti-mala ko lete to achchha hota.*" Some of the highly emotional scenes of Prithviraj were received with loud guffaws! I was heartbroken and slunk out of the darkened cinema hall. On my return to Bombay, the news had already preceded me. The trade papers had already announced the failure of the picture in Delhi. Now it was difficult to bring distributors even to see the previews. For *Shehar aur Sapna* we had held forty-seven previews, for *Aasman Mahal* we must have held at least twenty-seven. We thought we had been very generous by giving away the whole Bombay territory (which includes Maharashtra, Gujarat and Goa) to Prithviraj Kapoor. That is what he deserved. He was the one star who took no black money. Finally, the Bombay distributor gave him twenty thousand rupees as advance with more money to follow if and when the picture made more money. Till the day of his death, he had not

received a pie more.

Once again the invitation came from Karlovy Vary. The festival was held alternately in Moscow and Karlovy Vary—one year here, and the other year there, so again it was the turn of Karlovy Vary. The invitation was backed by a personal letter from Professor Brousil who said he would be happy to welcome me and my film to Karlovy Vary. I and Sathe decided to go—the exuberant mood of *Shehar Aur Sapna* was a little subdued now, but nevertheless Prithviraj was our trump card this time and we persuaded him to come along. This was the first Bombay premiere that I missed, but I felt behind a better and stronger alternative—the doyen Prithviraj Kapoor—who said he would attend the premiere and then take the next plane to Prague and then to Karlovy Vary. The day of the premiere it was raining cats and dogs, only a few stalwarts among the stars were there—Meena Kumari, Dharmendra, Sanjeev Kumar, etc., but the spirit was dampened by the rain.

When I heard it from Prithviraj upon his arrival, I learned of it and was not sorry to have missed the premiere. Prithviraj, with his magnificent personality and his oriental dress—a *chadar* slung over the shoulders of a *kurta*, and *chooridar* pajamas—created a great impression by his appearance. There was only one other actor who could compete with his personality—the veteran Georgian star who had accompanied his Soviet picture, *Soldier's Father*. For the first time in my life, as the leader of the Indian delegation, I had to give a cocktail party—the selection of wines and liquors was made by two teetotallers, Abbas and Devendra Kumar, the veteran film critic who attends more film festivals than any other two personalities in India put together. We selected the bottles by their exotic designs and colours. As the party was given immediately after the screening of *Aasman Mahal* that was the main topic of discussion, specially the performance of Prithviraj Kapoor.

No one was surprised when it was announced that the Academy of Art had given the best actor award for the stage and screen performances of Prithviraj Kapoor!

43. A Tale of Four Cities

An invitation came from the Berlin Film Festival inviting me to be a member of the jury. Since this was West Berlin¹, it came as quite a pleasant surprise as it was accompanied by a first class ticket, I had no hesitation in going there. The picture having been released and flopped, to go somewhere, the invitation was quite an escape and, therefore, welcome. I took the Lufthansa plane after *Aasman Mahal* had been released in Calcutta. The trouble with my films is that on the first few days—in big cities the whole of the first week—the halls are full and the appreciation is vociferous. So I was in a happy mood when I went to catch my plane. The Indian entry was *Nayak* and Satyajit Ray and the actor, Uttam Kumar, were also going to be there. Lufthansa planes went only up to Frankfurt and from there we had to take another airline for the short hop to Berlin.

West Berlin is an island in the sea of East Germany. The East German and Soviet films were not shown¹ at the Berlin Film Festival. So that year, the cry was the *Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming* (by director Norman Jewison). It was an American film, a delightful comedy which showed both sides as being human and humane. This was not in the competition but was the opening attraction. The inauguration was done by Dr Willie Brandt who made a very good speech in which there was nothing of the cold war. After that members of the jury were told to keep away from journalists and critics lest they give them an inkling of their impressions beforehand. The American member of the jury was Alpert, the partner and co-writer of Arthur Knight whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Delhi and Bombay. The brilliant young Italian director, the late lamented Passolini, who had the reputation

¹Now they are

of being a communist and was rather feminine-looking, was accompanied by a tough-looking "boyfriend." His recent murder in Rome by an eighteen year old boy was the sad climax to a brilliant and tragic life. Soon after Satyajit arrived, with Uttam Kumar and his distributor, but the etiquette of the jury forbade any talk or discussion with them. Among others, Chidanand Das Gupta and I had "hush hush" meetings. Devendra Kumar was also there, he being a favourite of Dr Bauer, the affable and sympathetic director of the festival. So, even with three films a day, I was left with a lot of time for myself. I have a "double-track" or a "triple-track" mind and can never concentrate on only one thing and so I was left with several hours in which I could write the script of my next film, *Bambai Raat ki Bahon Mein* (Bombay in the arms of the night). It turned out to be a compact and concise script with which I was quite pleased. In India, it was the era of crime films. So I tried to write a script which should look like a crime film and yet be a sociological document like my other scripts.

The final meeting of the jury was quite exciting. There were three films among the favourites and the supporters of each were vociferous in backing their favourites. The majority seemed to be in favour of the Polish film-maker's French film, *Cul De Sac* (produced by Michail Klinger) which appeared to me to be unnecessarily burdened with sex and violence. It was a good film in its own way but not up to the standard of a grand prix in a festival. Of Satyajit Ray's film, it could also be said that it was not up to his best. Yet it had a purpose and a point of view which was healthy—the dehumanization of a star of the stage and screen who gained everything but loses his own soul. The third remarkable film *Schonzeit Fur Fuchse* was made by some very young West German directors who seemed to be anxious about the rise of neo-fascism raising its head in West Germany.

When my turn came, I said that technically all the three films were excellent. But I voted for Satyajit's film not because of any parochialism or pro-Satyajit bias but because the pro-human theme came out vividly yet subtly. This was followed by angry denunciation by several members, one of whom (I forget the name) said that, as he saw it, Satyajit Ray was so afraid of sex that if he saw it coming, he would run a mile

away. My repartee to this was that if Polanski saw sex going its own way, he would run after it, forgetting the theme which he was pursuing. Ultimately, the result by majority vote was the Best Film *Cul De Sac* by Polanski, Best Director Carlos Saura (Spain), Special Prize to the young German directors for their film *Schonzeit Fur Fuchse*.¹ That night the results were announced and a big banquet followed. I had a snack or two and then slunk out of the hall, came to my hotel. There was one day left in Berlin and my script was not finished. Back in Bombay I would be engulfed by so many problems that there would be no chance. And so I sat down and did not leave my room till the fate of Johnny and the two girls in his life (one of whom he loved and the other who loved him) was sealed in a motor crash and Amar and Asha were going away, not towards the sunset, but towards the sunrise. Only then (next afternoon) I came down for lunch and made enquiries about the return booking. It is only left to record that the West German authorities duly took us on a pilgrimage to "The Wall" which separates the two Berlins which is an ugly monument to the cold war. I also took the opportunity of crossing over by train into East Berlin where I wanted to meet some friends. My first call was to Stephen Heyn the famous exiled American author and his wife Gertrude, who is a publisher of Seven Seas books in English from East Berlin. I had met them frequently in Moscow. They didn't seem to be very happy or very healthy then and as my time was short, I made my apologies and came away feeling rather sad about them. My next call was at the house of the then Indian journalist and translator, M. Arif Naqvi, who introduced me to his German wife and their charming daughter.

Back in India, I got the script typed for I am never satisfied with the script until my secretary Abdul Rehman has typed it and until my other assistant, Jaffer, has had the whole thing bound with the name in golden letters embossed on it. In this script the problem of casting was rather delicate and intricate. There were two heroes and three heroines. After hearing it, Inder Raj Anand inscribed on the script itself, "I wish I had

¹Satyajit Ray also got a special prize for direction.

written the story of it." But Dilip Raj, who was told to take up Johnny's role (the smart-alec bootlegger who steals millions from a cashier in the plane, who had a heart attack and wants to "buy" happiness with it but can't and ultimately has a car crash in which the two girls are also killed) refused because somebody would say that this was the part of the villain. I never insist on an actor playing a particular role. If he is not enthusiastic about it, he is out. I offered the role to Jalal Agha whose brilliant work I had seen in an Institute film, *Never on a Sunday*, and was very impressed by it. The term was over but the examination results were yet to come out. I enquired from his father, the actor Agha, who is an old family friend. He gave me a Poona telephone number and said that was where he was staging a play. I telephoned him there and then. Jalal promptly assented and gave the good news to all his friends before starting his stage performance. I had seen a young, tall and slim boy, Vimal Ahooja, playing the role of a painter in Delhi in a non-professional play by Revati Saran Sharma, brother-in-law of Krishenchander, and had predicted big things for the young actor if he came over to films. I offered him the role of the journalist and he too agreed. For his wife, I took Surekha, while for Rosy, the bootlegger's innocent daughter who dies in the end, Madhavi was an obvious choice. Within a month or two, we were shooting in our own office flat which I converted into the journalist's bedroom cum study.

The most remarkable shot of the film was when the camera which was placed on a cement crane which we had installed in front of our fourth floor office flat, follows the journalist and his wife, when he brings her home after an estrangement. It took us three rehearsals and four takes because the speed of the camera going up had to be synchronized with the couple taking the steps in their stride. The improvised camera crane, which was twice as high as the normal crane could be, was set up with only bamboos and had to be hauled up by an electric motor pulling up the cement tub on which the camera was placed and I and Ramchandra were seated. Ten years later when the same kind of shot was attempted in a studio by my friend, the producer Ramanand Sagar, something broke and the tub full of people came down causing injuries to many including the producer's cameraman-son. This could have also

happened to us.

I have a love-hate relationship with Bombay, that is particularly true of this picture. In the wild chase that brings the story to its climax—three cars chasing each other over the deserted city streets—there is something of abstract beauty. As in the beginning fantasy in the prologue of *Shehar aur Sapna*, Bombay without human beings in the daytime. I have tried to conjure the abstract beauty of Bombay and yet, without people, without men, women and children, the city is eerily deserted, whether by day or by night. Yes, I love Bombay, by day or night. But the point I wish to make is that beauty without people is nothing. It is like a graveyard—beautiful but lifeless. Many people urged me to call my film “Bombay by Night.” But I stuck to my original title *Bambai Raat ki Bahon Mein* although I did not want my film to be mistaken for the Night series. *Hong Kong by Night*, *Singapore by Night*, *London by Night*, *Paris by Night* and *Bombay by Night*. The very thought was revolting to me. The title of the film comes in the last dialogue spoken by Rosy, who has become demented after she has been raped, and who is wandering aimlessly across the deserted roads. She holds up her arms as if to embrace the night and says: “*O raat, mujhe apni bahon mein lay lo*” (Oh night, please take me in your arms). And the next moment Johnny’s car smashes in into her, and he with his cabaret girl friend (Leela or Laila or Lily, he never knew her real name) are smashed with her. The car, which was the symbol of the beauty and the power of Bombay, is upturned like a cockroach, its wheels still revolving in the air. Two bodies lay by the side of the car. Rosy the bootlegger’s daughter, who had innocently gone to deliver the bottles at Toto’s party, and Lily the glamour girl, who was at heart a simple Maharashtrian girl. And far from them, literally in a gutter, lay Johnny *dead*—with his tight pants, his bowtie only slightly askew, his dinner jacket spattered with his own blood and the scum from the gutter. But also like a pall over him, lie currency notes worth half a million rupees, also spattered with blood and scum. Most of the currency notes lie in the gutter itself.

That is my philosophy for the two faces of money—it comes from the gutter and reverts to the gutter. It also shows the

ugly face of Bombay—the Bombay of greed and violence. I cannot love this Bombay. I cannot show it because I do not see it, in any lovely night. As for the beauty of Bombay I find it among the pavement sleepers of Bombay, four of whom were the real heroes of *Shehar aur Sapna*, the tough *pahalwan* who yoked himself to a loaded cart like a bullock, the actor who gets himself whipped in a film studio for a few pieces of silver, the old band player who goes about with his broken violin still imagining the good old days while playing in a marriage procession, and the mad poet, the manuscript of whose novel written on scraps of papers was reduced to sudden pulp in one shower of rain.

There are the people of Bombay. The waifs and strays, the scum of society who are looked down upon high society. But they are the heroes of Bombay who come to the rescue of Bhola when he comes to Bombay and finds nothing but strong walls and stone-hearted people. But to revert to *Bambai Raat ki Bahon Mein*, making it gave me not only satisfaction but great pleasure, exposing the false face of Bombay in the story of one night. The money-greedy faces like that of Seth Daleria and other tycoons, the whisky drunk face of Toto the like of who would not mind playing with the honour of the innocent girl. In-between them were caught Johnny and Amar, the two young men who were tempted but Amar escaped, while Johnny succumbed to the lure of money and death. The last shot of the dead body and the money in the gutter was my summing up of Bombay.

As usual, my friends were all enthusiastic about *Bambai Raat ki Bahon Mein*. But the more they liked it the more apprehensive they were about its commercial future. Some distributors who were prepared to risk a little money on such a picture were fond of it but the others waited for the declaration of the awards. If it wins the major award, then they will take it.

Meanwhile I was involved in the Khosla Committee on censorship. It was a pleasure to work with a cultured and liberal-minded man like G.D. Khosla. The other members included some of my old friends like Hrishikesh Mukerjee and Ramoo Kariat, whose Malayalam film *Chemeen* had deservedly won the President's gold medal the previous year.

The committee took months and months. The meetings would be held now in Delhi, now in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. I remember that in Bombay we were confronted with the chairman and the regional officer Justice Khosla just casually asked the chairman if it was true that there was political censorship. That gave the gentleman a chance to speak about social and political ignorance and unconcerned producers. They never have any social or political themes to which anyone might object. They only know dancing, singing and hips swinging. That provoked me to challenge the statement. I referred to the pre-censorship of the novel *Two Sers of Rice* by Thakazi Shiv Shanker Pillai, which was submitted by the late Guru Dutt but was not approved because of its political contents. I pointedly asked if there was any dancing, singing and hips swinging in it. Then I mentioned the pre-censorship of my own script of *Shehar aur Sapna*. The censor had cut the scenes of Bhola's fight with the gangster. I asked "Did it come in the category of dancing, singing and hips swinging?" Of course, I was not so timid as the late Guru Dutt and went ahead with shooting the scenes just as written in the script. I not only got the picture passed by the censors but also secured the President's gold medal and afterwards when the picture was shown I remember the pertinent and honourable minister was heard shouting who had passed the picture? He was not even mollified when he was informed that the picture was not only passed but secured the President's gold medal. He demanded that the Censor Board chairman should see the picture and send him the report. The main objection was that I had shown people sleeping on the footpath. So the chairman called me again and naively asked me if people still slept on the footpath in Bombay.

I replied that he could see on both sides of the car where people are sleeping on the footpath, but he said that he always read the paper when going home. The chairman had luckily retired by then. But the whole committee chuckled at his naivete.

Just then my friend Mr Khanna of I. and B., who had come from outside, passed a slip to me on which was written "Congratulations, BRKBM wins the best black and white photography award. Jalal Agha gets honourable mention." I was

very happy to get this news. Ramchandra worked hard all these years, and at last his merit was recognized.

As for Jalal Agha it was a brilliant beginning. I decided to celebrate the occasion in my own way. I informed the committee that before the work of the committee was wound up I would submit a small film for censorship, which would be politically motivated. Everyone laughed at it as a joke, but then began the seventeen month struggle to get a less than seventeen hundred feet film entitled *The Tale of Four Cities* (*Char Shehar Ek Kahani*) passed by the Censor Board.

I knew the committee had still to go to Calcutta and Madras for its work and would also hold a general meeting in Delhi. But I started the work of the film on that very day. I asked my associate director to bring out the special lens which had been used to photograph the dolls for *Bharat Katha* and also to re-photograph the explosion scene from *Char Dil Char Rahen* which would be my first shot of this new picture symbolizing the explosion of independence. Meanwhile I took out all the photographs from the illustrated brochures showing the many sided development of India. Industry, agriculture, car manufacture, India-made aeroplanes in the sky, and finally the rocket being fired from a place in Kerala. I re-photographed all these things on cinematographic film. Then at night I went and took two running shots from a car which was stoned each time because what we were photographing by zoom lens were the entire dirty lanes where the infamous "cages" are situated. My still photographer Robinson went closer, risking both his camera and his life, by taking a series of these ugly and undressed beauties. Next day we got a prostitute from the "cage" to dramatize the tragedy of her life in our garage, which was turned for the time being into a cheap brothel.

I also asked my editor to lend us shots of Radha leaving her village where she was seen from the back, all in silhouette. This would go in the editing of the Bombay sequence. I went along with the Censor Committee to Calcutta, Delhi and Madras. I overstayed for a day at each place and spent that day photographing the realities of that city.

In the light of these four tragic examples of the exploitation of man (or woman) by man, the shots of India's progress seem hollow and false. Once again the Thumba rocket is fired, once

again it is "frozen" before it reaches the sky, and this time it is in *negative*—the music too is reversed—the achievements are real but they will continue to be hollow and *negative* till we do something to raise men and women to their original human dignity.

Is there hope then? Yes—and the last shot shows a sunflower bursting through a crack in the dry earth, like the 20-point programme that has emerged from the Emergency.

I completed the documentary much before the last meeting of the committee. I showed it first to the members of the committee to see if there was anything objectionable. They were all enthusiastic about the film and appreciated my point in giving visual shape to the discussion we had about "political films." Then I took it to the Bombay Board of Film Censors. It was seen first by a regional officer and the four members of the panel. They didn't know what to say. They passed on the ball to the revising committee, including one member of the Central Board. There was quite a crowd and quite a lengthy discussion. At last I was called in and was told that certain members, whom they did not name, had certain objections, which they also did not name, even when I asked for details. But from the talk and cross-talk that took place, they seemed to think that the screening of the documentary would raise problems of law and order and would upset byelections in Bengal which were imminent. They told me, if I agreed to revise the film according to their instructions, they would tell me what was wrong with it. I said the whole structure of the film would come down if a single shot was taken out. I said that the whole point of the film is there is political censorship and this point I had proved. At last, after a month, they sent me the list of objectionable shots and it was so ridiculous that I could have easily deleted those shots but would have lost the point. The objectional shots were:

1. The scene of women in the red light district, specially the shot showing the closing of the window by the lady;
2. The suggestive shots of bare knees;
3. Passing of currency notes when the pimp snatches away his share from the hands of the girl.

But the rule under which these shots were to be deleted concerned pornographic exhibitionism, and I was not prepared to agree to the implication that my documentary was *laissez vicier* and pornographic. The meanings that they had read into these shots were the opposite of what I had intended. For instance, there was no shot where the customer is shown paying anything for the favour received from the girl. The shot was of a pimp snatching away the lion's share of the few rupee notes the girl had received. There was a shot of a girl closing the window behind the bars, but it was intended to show that she was shutting her "shop," while the censors thought that she was creating privacy for her nefarious work. The third shot was an inverted frozen view of two bare legs which was in a series of similarly distorted views of legs and referred to the distortion of values rather than the distortion of human anatomy. In all, the shots came to eleven feet. But I would not agree to cut them out. So the film was sent to the government where, presumably, it was seen by the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, a man of culture like I.K. Gujral, and his family because the son and the wife of the minister whom I happened to meet the next day were both singing praises of the film.

I was told that I had just to speak to the minister and everything would be all right. But I did not want "everything to be all right." I wanted to put the censorship machinery in the docks. So, instead of the minister I went to my Supreme Court lawyer-friend, R.K. Garg, who was just waiting for such an opportunity to question the whole machinery of censorship. The Supreme Court could not go into the merits and demerits of the cuts imposed, but my lawyer-friend created a situation where the picture had to be seen by the court and so for the first time in its history, the Supreme Court sat in projection hall. I was sitting just ahead of the judges and I could see their reaction. After the sixteen-minute show, the Chief Justice said to me, "Well, I cannot comment on the merits of the case, but let me shake your hand for producing such a picture." Then followed other handshakes with all the judges present and even the advocate-general. Then, I knew, we had won the case.

After some days, in the sixteenth month of the case, I was offered a "clean Universal certificate" if I agreed to withdraw

the case which had made the position of the government look very ridiculous. I replied that if the certificate was being offered as a bait to make me withdraw the case, then I was not interested. If they thought that justice demanded that the clean Universal certificate be issued then let them give the certificate and leave the matter of withdrawal open to me. Next day, the certificate was handed over to me. I said "Thank you," but when the court asked me if I would like to withdraw the case, I said, "No, I have spent sixteen months of my time in getting certain clarifications and now it is too late to withdraw it." In a way, the verdict which was given the next month and ran into fifty-one foolscap pages did not confirm my lawyer's contention that the censorship machinery was ultra-vires. Indeed, the judgment quoted extensively from an article of mine justifying the censorship. But the Supreme Court, held that the government should give clear unambiguous guidelines so that such situations should not arise.

Meanwhile, my picture *Saat Hindustani* was ready and I released the documentary along with the film, playing a little gimmick for its introduction. Before the censor certificate comes into view, there are about twenty feet of blackness on the screen with rising suspense music and the certificate itself comes into view through a zoom-shot as if to say that "here it is, here it is, here it is."

44. The Scrambled Seven

The admiral stood, tall and erect, on the quarter-deck.

"Surrender" he bellowed and the quarter-deck man translated it into the morse code of his flags.

"They are refusing, Sir!"

The man with the flags interpreted the brief message that came from the other side.

"Then fire" the admiral ordered in a loud voice.

The guns on either side of him boomed, belching out flames of fire.

This was a scene from one of the most astonishing and vivid plays I have ever seen and the sound effects and light effects by Tapas Sen (contrived by that genius of stage effects) made the whole thing real.

The admiral seemed to have a sadistic tendency, he continued to chew his cigar and urged the gunmen to fire again and again at the mutineers.

It was a performance of the Little People's Theatre at Minerva Cinema in Calcutta and the scene was from the play *Kallol*, written and produced by Utpal Dutt, who seemed to have no end to his versatility. He was also the author of this play and other plays.

I had gone to Calcutta specially to see this play of the 1942 naval mutiny. Calcutta stage was then (as now) full of vitality, and this vitality often had political undertones.

Since then the image of the man—Utpal Dutt—was ingrained on my memory. When the time came for me to think of the casting of *Saat Hindustani* (Seven Indians) the first thing I thought of was Utpal Dutt. Of course there was no role of a sadistic admiral in my film. It was altogether a different kind of story. Normally, one wouldn't have even thought of this story as cinematic material.

The story came out of the Goa struggle reminiscences of my assistant, Madhukar, who would often regale us with the adventures he had while trekking up with the non-violent commandoes to hoist the tricolour on every police station they came across. They had to do it surreptitiously—they should not be seen or arrested till they reached Panjim—where they should make a public demonstration of their flag hoisting and their eventual arrest.

The story, to my mind, had cinematic possibilities—Madhukar had already told the story to several other producers and none of them had taken it up. I saw it as an epic of our freedom struggle, as the commandoes had come from all parts and provinces of India, a comment on national integration. A Goan girl's character had to be woven in it, and I would show her several years after liberation in a critical heart condition. She remembers the old adventures she had with her comrades.

I had reduced them all to *seven* instead of the original *eleven* of Madhukar's real life adventure story.

There is something mythical about the number seven. There are seven basic colours in the rainbow. The ultimate Truth is supposed to be hidden behind seven veils of mystery and no Hindu marriage can be solemnised without "*Saat Pheray*" or seven rounds of the sacrificial fire. In the fairy tales, the king always had seven daughters, seven sons, or seven wives . . . snow-white had seven dwarfs!

Once upon a time (and this is no fairy tale) a director got into trouble by selecting a story requiring seven main artistes: six young men and a girl. He could not even tell the writer to reduce it to the conventional trio—hero, heroine and villain—because he himself was the writer. And he could not tell the producer to find another story, or another story writer, for the producer was an obstinate and impossible fellow-himself!

Having secured postponement of her heart operation for a week, the Goan girl had six telegrams sent to Calcutta, Jullundur, Banaras, Ranchi, Madras and Karad in Maharashtra.

The telegrams were duly delivered. But each of them was involved in sectarian and parochial struggle. One in Banaras was getting the glass panes of shops with English lettering broken by his Hindi Sena; the one in Ranchi was ridiculing Hindi, from the point of view of the Urdu purist and fanatic and

getting his house burnt by Hindi fanatics; the one in Calcutta, a football referee, was getting a serious head injury, by stone-throwing and chair-burning students, while the *powada* singer in Maharashtra was being dragged into the struggle about the Maharashtra-Mysore border agitation. The prosperous Punjabi farmer was to come home and listen in to yet another partition of Punjab and was lamenting it while the telegram from Goa lay unattended. And finally the Tamilian who was once a Hindi Pracharak was being swept off his feet and throwing his Hindi signboard into a bonfire of Hindi books and refusing the telegram till it was brought, translated into Tamil. The young Goan woman, the adventurous journey across Goa, as a guide to the other comrades through struggle and suffering, they became known to be what they were—*Seven Indians*.

All this she would remember in flashback as she lay there in the hospital waiting for her companions. "One for all and all for one" was their motive once. They had locked her up in her house while they went out to do their flag hoisting and they were beaten up by the Goanese police, tortured in cells and finally thrown over the border. But she would not remain idle. She would join in with the Goan commandos' activities, blow up a bridge over which the Portugese army was to march, and would be finally deported to a prison in Portugal. From there she would return with an incurable heart disease.

At last the six Hindustanis, no longer the young patriots but middle-aged, grey-haired individuals, who did not recognized each other, for the light of loyalty was no more in their eyes. Six taxis would approach the hospital gate just as the coffin carrying the young Goanese woman was being carried out. The old doctor, seeing six strangers approaching the coffin, asked them. "Are you the Seven Indians?" And when they nodded "Yes" at last looking at each other, the doctor said, "You have come too late. She could not wait for you."

As the body of the woman in the coffin was lowered in the grave, the six surviving Indians would clasp each other's hands and they would march singing the song of togetherness. They would no longer be the "Six" but, like olden days, they would no longer be Hindu, Muslim, Tamilian, Punjabi, Bengali and Maharashtrian. They would be the *Seven Indians*, including the Goanese girl, Maria, her soul marching along with them.

I was so excited when I finished the screenplay that I telephoned all my friends and informed all my assistants, including Madhukar, to come and hear it in my fourth floor office on the very next day. That was a ritual which they never missed and I would get their suggestions for casting the film.

I wanted to prove by my casting that there was no particular Hindu or Muslim, Tamilian, Maharashtrian or Bengali ethnic type. To begin with I would transform the smart and sophisticated and versatile Jalal Agha into the Maharashtrian *powada* singer. Even Jalal was shocked to hear this. But I reassured him that, with the proper make-up and get-up, nobody would recognize him except as a Maharashtrian rural folk singer. Madhukar, who hails from Meerut, would be a Tamilian, Sharma (Brahmin by caste) would also undergo a similar transformation and Utpal Dutt, the cigar-chewing admiral, would be the tractor-driving Punjabi farmer. So far the casting was clear in my mind. On one of my visits to Kerala I had met Madhu, the handsome hero of the Malayalam screen, and he had approached me and expressed his desire to work in a Hindi film with me. I would make him the sensitive Bengali, I wouldn't have to work much on his Bengali accent for he had lived with a Bengali family. Now only the Hindi and Urdu fanatics were left. Jalal one day brought with him his friend Anwar Ali (brother of the comedian Mehmood) in whose eyes I saw the Jana Sanghi fanaticism. So I decided to make him the Swayam-sevak who hates Urdu and speaks jaw-breaking Hindi. That left one Indian, the Muslim Urdu fanatic. Since I wanted these boys to be of different ages and different heights the one vacancy left was for a tall and handsome man. He had to be thin, also corresponding to the thin image of my friend the late Asrarul Haque "*Majaz*." One day someone brought a snapshot of a tall young man and I thought that the boy was in Bombay. I said, "Let me see him in person."

"He will be here day after tomorrow evening." Again, presuming he was in Bombay, I thought he must be working somewhere and wouldn't be free till the evening.

On the third day, punctually at 6 p.m., a tall young man arrived who looked taller because of the *churidar* pajama and Jawahar jacket that he was wearing. This young man would one day be known as Amitabh Bachchan, the heartthrob of

millions. But I did not know his name. Roughly the following dialogue took place between us:

"Sit down, please, Your name?"

"Amitabh." (Not Bachchan).

It was an unusual name—so I asked, "What does it mean?"

"The sun. It's also one of the synonyms for the Gautama Buddha."

"Education?"

"B.A. from Delhi University."

"Have you worked in films before?"

"No one has taken me so far."

"Who were they?"

He mentioned very prominent names.

"What did they find wrong with you?" The boy spoke with frankness. "They all said I was too tall for their heroines."

"Well we have no such trouble. In a way we have no heroine in our film. Even if we had, that wouldn't prevent me from taking you."

"Taking me? Are you really going to take me? Without even a test?"

"That depends. First I must tell you the story. Then I must tell you your role and see if you will be enthusiastic about playing it. Then I shall tell you what we can afford to pay you. Only then if you agree, shall we sign the contract."

I read him out the complete story and saw his face become alive with interest. When he was the cultured, decent Indian, feeling patriotic at the end of it, I asked him which role he would like to play. He told me the two which particularly impressed him. The role of the Punjabi, and the role of the Muslim. I told him he was perhaps a Punjabi, and that made him unfit to play that role. He asked me why. I gave him the reason, the reason of having a scrambled cast. The idea appealed to him greatly. He said, "I think, I know what you mean. Then I would like to play the Muslim role specially because he is under a cloud of suspicion. And only at the end the suspicions are removed and he is proved a patriot."

Then I told him we could pay him no more than five thousand rupees, which was the standard figure for all the roles.

He seemed a little hesitant, and I asked him, "Are you earning more than that?"

"I was," he said.

I asked him what he meant.

He said that he was getting about sixteen hundred a month in a firm in Calcutta. "I resigned the job and came over."

I was astonished. "You mean to say that you resigned a job of sixteen hundred rupees a month, just on the chance of getting this role! Suppose we can't give the role to you?"

He said, "One has to take such chances," with such conviction that I said, "The role is yours." Then I called my secretary, Abdul Rehman, to dictate the contract. I asked the tall young man for his name and address.

"Amitabh—" after some hesitation, "Amitabh Bachchan, c/o Dr H.R. Bachchan"

"Stop," I said.

"This contract cannot be signed until I write and get your father's consent. He is a colleague of mine on the Sovietland Nehru Award Committee. I wouldn't like to have a misunderstanding with him. I am afraid you will have to wait for three days more."

"You can ask my Dad but frankly, do I look like a runaway?"

I told him that runaways don't have any particular look.

So I dictated, instead of the agreement, a letter to Dr Bachchan in New Delhi and asked him if he was willing to let his son become an actor. Three days later a telegram came reading "No Objection Where You Are Concerned." This is the whole story about how Amitabh Bachchan came into films. For a month or more I had to teach him the phonetics of the difficult Urdu words which would occur in his poetic dialogues. Similarly Anwar Ali was trained to speak like a fanatical Hindiwalla. As most of the passages at arms were between these two, the dialogue could also be rehearsed.

It is important to clarify this at length because a lot of ugly rumours have been set afoot about Amitabh and myself. It has been said, for instance, that it was the recommendation letter of the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, that got him the role in my picture. I don't give roles to people who bring introduction letters. And in any case the Prime Minister did not write and communicate with me—to cast Amitabh Bachchan in my picture.

After signing with us he also got a small and significant role in Sunil Dutt's *Reshma aur Shera* but it was I who introduced him to Hrishikesh Mukherji which led to his being cast in *Anand*. But that is neither here nor there since "Rishi-Da" has his own methods of selecting artistes. If I had not introduced Amitabh someone else would have done. I am glad for Amitabh's success for I know that he is a better actor than several matinee idols.

The point is that whether *Saat Hindustani* ran for ten weeks or ten days or ten matinee shows, Amitabh Bachchan's performance in it was a thrilling one, winning for him the coveted and outstanding special mention in the national awards.

When he was married, Amitabh surprised me by coming personally to my house to invite me and when Jaya bore their first child, I reciprocated the feeling for her father by presenting her with her first silver "chhagal."

To revert to *Saat Hindustani* . . . the problem now was to find the heroine, the seventh Indian. The script required a Goanese girl with her hair cut short (by the Portugese soldiers after raping her). She was the girl who was never smiling, who had only one mission in her life—vengeance against her stolen youth and her dreams. Because of the cut hair, we were taken up by a model, though she was not suitable for the part and was giggling all the time. Models, it is my experience, seldom make good film artistes. Their concentration is all the time on the modelling, not on acting. Persis Khambata of *Bambai Raat ki Bahon Mein* should have been a lesson to us but we made the same mistake twice. However, it was quickly rectified and the girl was replaced after only one or two scenes.

Our new heroine was Jalal Agha's sister, Shahnaz, who was the daughter of the veteran comedian Agha, who was introduced not by Jalal but by Virender (Tinu) Anand, who was my assistant till he migrated to Calcutta to assist Satyajit Ray. His interest in *Saat Hindustani* was not strictly professional but, as I came to know much later, was romantic. (Today they have been married for three years and are the proud parents of a little girl called Isha—God given or the gift of *Ishwer*, or according to Muslim interpretation, the last prayer of the day, a real symbol of national integration and undoubtedly a creative end product of *Saat Hindustani*. Like the other successful

inter-caste and inter-creed marriages, such as my own daughter Ushi who is supremely happy, having married Satish Jain, an advertising executive, or Mujji's sister, my sister-in-law, Chhadi, who is happily married to the Hindu writer Munish Saxena). Such examples can be multiplied and the wonder is that they are all of them (unlike many arranged marriages) happy and contented.

My fourth floor flatlet which I use as my office became a veritable school of Indian languages. Anwar Ali started labouring over the most difficult phrases of Sanskritized Hindi. Hindi scholar Madhukar began to declaim the Tamil verses of Subramaniam Bharati. Utpal Dutt, a seasoned veteran, had no difficulty mastering the Punjabi accent. Amitabh, who knew no Urdu to start with, began reciting *ghazals* until he got the feel of a seasoned *shair*! Jalal had no difficulty with Marathi, having lived in Maharashtra all his life. Madhu had lived for a couple of years as a paying guest with a Bengali family in Delhi where he was doing his acting course at the National School of Drama. So he too had no difficulty with Bengali. Most creditable was Jalal's sister, Shahnaz Agha, who mastered the Goan Konkani dialect in a few days.

Shooting the film was a great adventure. We began in Bombay in the hall of a school which was converted into a camp of satyagrahis which was originally located in Poona. Here the six Hindustanis were selected. They were trained in some ruins near Ghodebunder, one of Bombay's suburbs. Here the sensitive poet (Amitabh Bachchan) had to fight with the tough Punjabi when Utpal Dutt provoked him (as per script) by calling him *Suar da puttār* (the son of a pig) and Amitabh got so angry that he beat him up (a little more than that in the script). The selector and trainer of the commandos was played by my friend Sukhdev who looked completely in character with his beard, plastered leg and all. Then we all went to Poona and there each of the Hindustanis in his provincial costume was to board the train separately. Shot in the train was the scuffle with the Portugese spy (played by Irshad Panjatan, the celebrated mime artiste) who was thrown out of the running train. That was done in Byculla siding in a stationary train but we also had to take the shots of the running

train. Amitabh had already shown his part in the Bombay siding by being so sensitive as to try to jump out of the running train. Utpal Dutt, and Jalal Agha succeed in preventing him and Utpal gave him a memorable resounding slap and asked him for the *sher*:

*Aandhi aaye ya toofan koi gum nahin
Hai yehi aakhri imtahaan sathiyo.*

Amitabh did so with real tears from his eyes.

Poona to Belgaum where we got down from the train. Now we had to go to Molem. This was in Goa. This was the old border town in Portugese India. Here were Portugese signs and symbols engraved all over the village. The villagers were very friendly. So was the Government of Goa which had allowed us the use of the two-room dak bungalow and also given us permission to shoot anywhere in the forest. Here we stayed for three weeks. We were a big group as the sound truck people were also with us. We also had to arrange for their boarding and lodging. There were three small rooms and a big hall with a wide verandah. One bedroom was assigned to Mr and Mrs Utpal Dutt, who also had to accommodate Shahnaz. Utpal being a Marxist and old revolutionary did not mind the arrangement. His wife was a veteran of the People's Theatre stage. She volunteered to look after our cooking arrangements. One room we gave to the sound truck unit, where they could take their cameras apart and then after cleaning them up, reassemble them. One little room we assigned to Madhu of Kerala and Ramchandra the cameraman. They had to be segregated not because of their eminence or because of any contagious malady but because both of them snored. The rest of us, myself and all my assistants slept on the ground in the big hall. Each of them had their trunk or suitcase against the wall and their bedding spread alongside. There was only one exception, it was Amitabh Bachchan who had chosen to bring one large tin trunk which also contained his bedding. Every night he would open the trunk, take out his bedding and spread it out. He would eat in the last shift because before eating he had to write two letters every day. One was to his mother or "Dad" (as he called him)

and the other presumably to his current girlfriend.

Everyone had his own mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. Utpal Dutt played chess with Jalal Agha, Anwar Ali and Amitabh, when he was free from his letter writing. I would sit down with my production manager to do accounts. The problem of rupees, annas, and pies was no less important than the footage we had canned. In my script I had two ladders—one for the expenses, the other for the edited footage shot. The ideal was that both the ladders should rise up equally fast or, better still, the ladder of expenses should lag behind the ladder of finance.

I always play such gimmicks with myself. I have a whole page divided into squares and each square is numbered according to the number of scenes. As soon as the scene is completed it is filled in with a red coloured pencil. If a scene is cancelled or deleted it is crossed out or filled in a blue pencil. One look at the diagram gives me the complete picture of how much work had been done and how much work remained to be done. To economize on time some of us shaved in the morning, others in the evening. Those who shaved in the morning, bathed in the evening, and those who shaved in the evening, bathed in the morning. Everyone who got ready had his meal in the first shift. As there were not enough chairs, the rest had to eat in the second shift. There was no distinction whether the latecomer was Amitabh Bachchan or the driver of the sound truck. Unless we were shooting at night—and we were shooting for many nights for which we carried generators and artificial lights.

During the two months we were in Goa we moved to three different villages and then on to Panjim. From the second village we hitchhiked, alongwith our equipment, on a freight train and got down at the next signal station to climb a mountain where we were to shoot some of the most amazing scenes of the picture. Everything had to be carried on our shoulders—whether it was a camera, or a bundle of lunch packets. It was a tremendous waterfall but we had to actually crawl along the rocks—one foot slip could land us in the gorge. Here we photographed the Seven Indians tied to each other with a rope like mountaineers. Everyone was climbing with *everyone else's* help. Amitabh Bachchan was last in the line. His boot slips on a loose rock which goes hurtling down the wet slope. Next to

him is Anwar Ali, playing the fanatical Hindu, who gets a terrific jerk for the whole weight of Amitabh (playing a Muslim) is on him. But with super human courage, Anwar Ali holds on to the rope, helped by all the five tied to the same rope. While Amitabh is dangling in the air at the end of the rope it is shown that Sharma (Anwar Ali) takes out his knife. You feel, because of their earlier hostility, that he is going to cut the rope and send the tall Muslim (Amitabh) to his doom. But he doesn't. He fixes the knife in a crevice and uses it as a lever for his foot. The spray from the fall was so strong that we were drenched where we are standing with our cameras two hundred feet away. Sharma pulls inch by inch hauling up the Muslim dangling from the rope. At last a hand appears above the edge of the ledge and your heart is in your mouth. All the six Indians are pulling at the rope so that their hands are bloodied but it is not the blood of an Indian killed in a night. At last Anwar Ali (Amitabh) crawls up to the slippery ledge and two bloodied hands are extended to him. He, too, extends his bloodied hands and the two men, enemies and friends, fall into each other's embrace. It was a moment of real excitement and joy. For the meaning of "one for all and all for one" was never more explicit. The whole unit of technicians, who normally take such emotions in their stride, spontaneously burst out clapping for the new meaning of the scene just pictured on the top of the mountain.

Coming down the slippery slopes was even more dangerous. Everyone was drenched to the bones. They were all shivering. Someone said, "If only we could get some brandy!" *Someone*—I, of all people—had taken brandy with him and when we reached the signal station it was poured down the throats—first of the shivering artistes and then of the drenched technicians.

We took the freight train going back and, warmed by the brandy, the whole unit burst out into song. The whole group was riding in three freight cars and so there were three songs:

1. *Saare jahan se achchha Hindustan hamara.*
2. *Jana gana mana adhinayak jaya hay.*
3. *Dekhna hai zore kitna baazu-e-qaatil mein hai.*

We arrived back at the dak bungalow, changed into the dry clothes and there was another surprise waiting at the dining table. Chicken for all, with hot *chapaties*, which I had already ordered. In all my hundreds of days of shooting films this was the greatest day.

And then it was the last day of our shooting in the village of Fonda and Jalal said at breakfast that he would like to order chicken dinner for everybody as it was his birthday. I said to him, "Say no more, everything will be done." And it was in the evening when they returned. The hall was swept clean, the trunks and the suitcases had mysteriously disappeared, there were posters on the walls giving Jalal Agha greetings for a happy birthday. The place was supposed to be a combination of the Taj Mahal Hotel, the *Folies Bergere* of Paris and the Ritz of London. The birthday boy was caricatured in his birthday suit and a nipple in his mouth!

That night there was singing—Bengali, Bhatiali folk songs of UP, Laavni of Maharashtra and unprintable songs in all languages and dancing which was mostly done by the birthday boy himself, Jalal Agha, one of the most popular of our unit or any unit. Amitabh sang his "*Jis ki Biwi Lambi . . .*" a funny song lampooning all wives—tall, short, black and white. This was among the most memorable moments of our stay in Goa.

We came to Panjim. Staying in the government guest house here we got a stack of mail and papers to read. At last we knew of the great split that had taken place in the Congress. The extreme rightists like Morarji Desai and others were ousted from the organization and the government and there was the atmosphere of the mini revolution in the country. My esteemed friend, Mr R.K. Karanjia wrote to me:

Congratulations.

When your book "*Return of the Red Rose*" came out there were your (Communist) friends who said that Abbas had sold himself to the Establishment. Morarji is out and thank God for that.

Well, with the publication of the Economic Programme, Indira Gandhi emerges as you have described her (as the leader of progressive forces) and not as denigrated by them.

All power to your pen.

Thus it was more than appropriate that the end title of *Saat Hindustani* was also “The Beginning” and that the picture won the award for national integration.

45. Drama in the Desert

Towards the end of March 1974 my friend, Inder Raj Anand, had a heart attack. He says that it was written in his *kundli* (horoscope) that at the age of forty-five he would fall like an oak tree by a disease caused by a blood clot in his veins. Three days after I got the news of my winning the President's gold medal, and three hours after he had taken the last shot of his first (and the last) directorial venture, Inder was stricken by a massive attack of thrombosis.

I remember the occasion very well because I was dining at the house of my friend D.R. Mankekar, then the resident editor of the *Indian Express*. Among the guests were several literary figures including the well-known novelist Manohar Malgonkar, a retired military officer, who had nothing military about him and looked what he was—an intellectual—who must have looked most awkward in his military uniform. Also present there was the doyen of Marathi litterateurs and the great humourist, the late Mr P.K. Atre and the idea had just struck me that Atre, with his huge frame and big booming voice, would have looked the part of a colonel much better than Manohar Malgonkar.

Atre was the first to win the President's gold medal for his Marathi picture *Shamchi Aai* based on a story by the late Sane Guruji, the great Marathi writer. I saw this picture only recently on television and it certainly deserved the award for its very human quality and artistic simplicity. I was trying to persuade Atre, who had also once been my neighbour when I was living in Shivaji Park, to lend me his medal for a day so that I could get it photographed and enlarged for the artistic painting of a hoarding and six-sheet poster. Atre was narrating to me how he had almost decided to sell the gold medal because at that time there was no cash award to go with it, not even a return airfare from Bombay to Delhi. So he misunder-

stood my request and thought I wanted to borrow the medal to put it round my neck and get myself photographed. "Take my tip," he said, "and wear the medal on a black *sherwani* and then get yourself photographed. The black background sets off the gold of the medal beautifully." I had no such intention but before I could say so, the telephone bell rang. I don't know why I stopped in my conversation, for the telephone call might have been for anyone and presumably it was for the host. Was it a premonition?

Mankekar answered the call and then he looked at me. "It's for you," he said.

I had an inexplicable sense of anxiety. There was no 'hello' from either side.

"Bachchoo Bhai," said the voice of Sham Bahen (Mrs Inder Raj Anand), "Inder has had an heart attack. Please come at once."

I was not very far from their flatlet on Warden Road. Explaining my situation to Mankekar I took a taxi. I was there in a few minutes. The doctor had already arrived, similarly called by the neighbour's telephone. He was examining Inder. They had no bed in the flat and in any case Inder preferred to sleep on a mattress on the floor. Their children were away to school in Ajmer. I knew very little about heart attacks at that time. So I waited for the doctor to finish the examination. When he came out he said to me frankly, "I suppose you know what cardiac thrombosis is?" I nodded my head, only partly hearing what the doctor said. "If you can get an oxygen cylinder from somewhere he will feel easier to breathe. . . . We shall remove him to the hospital in the morning. . . ."

I started out in search of the oxygen cylinder and was shocked to find how difficult it was to get this life-saving device. I went to every hospital and nursing home within a radius of about four miles. I went to all the chemist shops in the area up to Fort and each one referred me to someone else. At last at about 12 p.m. I found it in a third floor room in a narrow and odorous lane which was cluttered up with all kinds of junk but it had a gas cylinder as well. I and Inder's driver took it home. After we applied the tube to his nostrils he felt a little relieved. Mercifully Sham Bahen has a flair for nursing. I suppose she

must have acquired it while nursing her father who died of cancer. But she was not a hysterical weeping type.

Next morning we took Inder to the Breach Candy Hospital which was one of the best nursing homes in Bombay. Here Inder passed through a series of crises. One day the doctor asked me to remain near the telephone somewhere near. But Inder was a giant of a man and pulled through. His will-power was tremendous.

One day I brought Dr Baliga to see Inder. He hesitated because Inder was another physician's patient. But I said it would be a friendly visit. Dr Baliga had himself had a heart attack a year ago, and joked about it to Inder. "Soon it will be rampant like flu and just as easy to cure. Hope to see you, Inder, after I return from Vienna." Alas, he had a sudden heart attack and died in Vienna. That was the last occasion I saw him.

There was one other man who helped Inder to survive. He was Kahil Gibran, the Lebanese mystic and humanist whose *Prophet*, translated into more than thirty languages after his death, has become the gospel of this material age. All the time that he was conscious, Inder was obsessed with the idea of going to Lebanon where Kahil was born and then to New York and Boston where he died. He had read almost everything that Gibran wrote and, unknown to his doctors, he got me to provide him some more books of Gibran. He was a voracious reader, is still a voracious reader despite the cataract in his eyes. In the course of time he had a whole library hidden under his mattress. Two subjects possessed him. Kahil Gibran and the heart attack. As he slowly recovered he became an authority on both.

In six weeks he was allowed to take a train to Madras to write some film script or the other. In six months he was in Delhi to persuade the Finance Ministry to give him foreign exchange for his research on Kahil Gibran. I always believed in starting from the top and so I telephoned the late Mr T.T. Krishnamachari and he said, "Bring along your friend."

T.T.K. was well aware of the importance of Kahil Gibran or any project to film his life. He knew it would require some foreign exchange to go to Beirut or New York to complete the research. He needed no persuasion and agreed to sanction the

required foreign exchange. Then the talk turned to other matters like the government's economic policies, of which Inder is a knowledgeable and rigid critic. I also let the Finance Minister have it, regardless of the fact that I had gone to seek a favour. "What are you planning and doing to assure the people two meals a day?" I asked. "Nothing for argument's sake. But you are worried about meals when there are places where village women have to trudge every alternate day thirteen to fourteen miles to fetch a pot of water because the well in their own villages have gone dry. I have just returned from such a place."

"Where is it?" I asked aghast.

"On the Indo-Pak border in Rajasthan. Have you ever been there?"

"I haven't." I replied, "But certainly I would like to."

It seemed the Finance Minister had gone there to see the situation with regard to border roads and had come back concerned with the water situation in that region.

The idea occurred to me, "I must tell this to Panditji." But alas, he was no more. So I sought an interview with Prime Minister Shastri and straightaway put it to him, "Sir, do you know there are places in this country where women have to go thirteen to fourteen miles to bring a pot of water on their heads?"

He smiled sadly and said, "It seems that T.T.K. has been talking to you. Yes it is true. There are such places. But do you know what we are doing about it?"

"I suppose, you are making a scheme of digging some tube wells."

"No, no." The little man said, "We are doing something bigger and greater. We are building the greatest and the biggest canal, greater than the Fargana Canal in the USSR, to bring the water from the Punjab and take it hundreds of miles into the Rajasthan desert. Don't you think this is a theme worthy of your talent?" He pointed out the course of the Rajasthan Canal on the map of India hanging behind him.

"Sir, do you mean a film?"

"Yes," he said, "Why don't you make a film about this great human drama?"

So now, after several years, this would be the theme of my

film. It was a subject after my own heart. Before I surveyed the place, however, I wrote a tentative synopsis and named it: *Do Boond Pani*.

But this synopsis needed local colour and numerous details of village life in Rajasthan. I had to go to Jaipur and maybe also Jaisalmer. The difficulty was I didn't know anyone in Jaipur. When I mentioned this difficulty to my friend Uma Vasudev, the writer, she said, "Of course you know the Hoojas. At least they know you very well. Years ago they were both in the BBC, London." In the meantime Mr Hooja had become secretary to the Government of Rajasthan. Then she added, "Also if you want to know about the Rajasthan desert come and meet my father for years ago he was an engineer who made a survey of the Rajasthan desert and wrote a massive report about it."

Mr Vasudev, turned out to be a most amiable and hospitable old man. He was most interested about my project and told me a legend that he had mentioned even in his report. And that provided me with the emotional base of my story.

Years ago there were a husband and wife who were walking in the waterless desert. They had only a few drops of water in their *chhagal*. Each wanted the other to drink those precious drops of water and they died saying to each other, *Tu pi, tu pi*." This legend was carved on two stone pillars which were buried somewhere in the desert.

I was so excited by this legend that I could not sleep the whole night. I kept on thinking how best to integrate the "*Tu pi, tu pi*" legend in my screenplay.

This whole conversation had started in the India Coffee House (now, alas, no more) where Uma used to preside over a gathering of fellow writers and fellow journalists. Since then I have made a point always of going to the India Coffee House whenever I am in Delhi. For who knows what other legends I might imbibe along with my cup of hot coffee?

From Delhi to Jaipur was nearly an hour's hop by Indian Airlines. That very evening I was talking to the Hoojas at their bungalow where Mrs Usharani Hooja's sculptures were cluttering up the place. I asked the lady if she had any objection to being the art advisor of *Do Boond Pani*. "What will I have to

do?" she asked. I told her the "*Tu pi, tu pi*" legend which simply fascinated her. Then I came to the point. "You have to design and execute this legendary pillar which has been lost in the desert."

"What makes you think there was one pillar? For all I know there might have been two. Anyway, where do you want them fixed?" she asked.

"Anywhere in the desert," I said, "I want them to be portable. They will be our landmark to indicate the village where the hero and heroine live and love each other. They will also be the last thing the caravan of migrants leave from on their camels. There I will take them and install them on the bank of the canal to show that the canal has at last reached the waterless village."

She agreed to the proposal and there and then sketched the two pillars—one with the profile of a man and the other with the profile of a woman.

Through Mr Hooja we met the government officials. The Chief Minister was my old Aligarh junior, the late Mr Barkatullah Khan, and he promised us all kinds of facilities including permission to shoot anywhere.

We went to the bazar and bought the colourful clothes and silver jewellery which is typical of Rajasthan villagers. When I learnt from a local poet that a sword is the proud possession of every Rajasthani I also bought an old sword in a red velvet coloured scabbard. I still don't know if it was illegal to carry that sword about. But after the commercial failure of the picture it is still balanced on a bookshelf which I can see as I write these lines—to prove that the pen is mightier than the sword.

From Jaipur I and my associate director Athar Siraj went to Jodhpur and from there we took a taxi and arrived in the fantastic city of Jaisalmer, which Satyajit Ray has so well exploited in his film *Goopi Gayen Baga Bayen*. The desert had already begun at Jodhpur and the road and railway track were often cut off by sand drifts. In the ocean of sand, Jaisalmer was an oasis, sitting on top of a hill. On the way we had seen the dry soil experimental farm and wondered how dry farming would transform the desert. We stayed in the dak bungalow through the courtesy of Mr Hooja who had given us a letter

of introduction. We learnt of another film unit, the fabulous Sunil Dutt who was filming his *Reshma aur Shera*, a Romeo and Juliet type of love story, in which we were interested because our old cameraman Ramchandra was photographing it. We took a jeep and reached their camp which was in a village not far from the Pakistan border. We reached there at night and had to wait an hour for the unit to return from location. We started back after meeting our old friends at about 10 p.m. And as we were warned we lost our way in the scrub and the sand. On an elevation our jeep stopped dead. We could hear the Pakistani border guards talking, presumably about us.

After that we thought that silence was golden and discretion was the better part of valour. We had evidently twisted far from our road, which was of course no road at all, but a track in the desert. We had obviously drifted westward to be within audible distance of the Pakistan border. It was a dangerous situation so we decided that before sunrise we should push the jeep down the scrub covered slope. We pushed and heaved silently lest the noise gave the location away. It was just in time for soon it was dawn and with our binoculars we could now see the serpentine track about a mile away. We had not drifted far from it and evidently had been going around it. At last, we brought the jeep to a place where it could not be seen or heard by the Pakistani guards. It was a narrow escape and despite the desert cold, we were perspiring from the effort of pushing the jeep. When the jeep started, we raced along to the Jaisalmer dak bungalow and it was broad daylight by the time we reached there.

We saw a remarkable sight which we had not noticed before. There were bulldozers, earth-movers and gigantic draglines, American equipment worth billions of rupees which had been standing so long that it had sunk deep into the sand and seemed to be permanently installed there. When we enquired about it, we learned that this was the earth-moving machinery which had been bought and brought to make the border roads so that the tanks and other military vehicles could pass over it. Technically, it belonged to the Border Roads Organization. But the same machinery could be used for digging the Rajasthan Canal. Why was it not used? Why was it resting and rusting in

the Jaisalmer dak bungalow? That we could not find out.

We took another jeep ride to Sunil Dutt's location and found it among the ruins in the natural and curvaceous lines which made the sand most photogenic, almost like an oriental carpet with a zigzag design. We asked for the name of the place and whether any water was available within a few miles. We found that no water was available and that Sunil Dutt would bring tankers full of water from Jaisalmer at enormous cost, which we could not afford. We decided to drive back and just by the side of the road, found what we wanted. Hills of sand where we could easily install our two monuments. It was not far from Jaisalmer and water for drinking purposes could easily be brought there in our trucks. I and Athar returned to Bombay satisfied that our location hunting had been fruitful.

We began shooting in Bombay at the R.K. Studios where we had prepared a fantastic set representing the interior of the hut, with other huts in the background. For this hut, we needed a typical door which we would take to Jaisalmer and there instal it in a similar round hut to match the continuity of the indoors and outdoors. With great difficulty we scoured the shops that deal in building material, whenever any house is dismantled. At last, we found the door which we wanted. It was carved in the Rajasthani style and it fitted the entrance of our hut. It was sufficiently peculiar so that when carted to the desert in Rajasthan it would seem to be the same hut, the interior of which we were now going to shoot. On a particular day, we started shooting the marriage song which the sister of Ganga Singh (Jalal Agha) and her "*sahelis*," in typical Rajasthani costume, bought by us in Jaipur and Jaisalmer, sing to welcome their revered sister-in-law. But before the scene was finished, I had to contend with the star system which ordained that the poorest heroine could look like a beauty queen. We had provided a beautiful dress and jewellery to make Simi look like a Rajasthani bride. She is a very good artiste, remembered her dialogue, and even enacted them according to the Rajasthani dialect, for which we had hired a coach. But when it came to "make-up," she would not listen to the make-up man and arrived looking like a Rajasthani princess who had never carried a pot of water on her head nor trekked miles across the burning

sand. She has Rajasthani features of the patrician kind and she argued that she looked every inch a Rajasthani. I found it impossible to convince her that the make-up of a working woman of Rajasthan had to be different. Anyhow, she agreed to make certain amendments to her snow-white complexion and reduced the quantity of mascara on her eyes, so we took the shots. We had hired a camel to sit in the foreground to give authentic local colour. But this beast's gruntings spoilt quite a lot of soundtrack.

Madhu Chhanda, a newcomer, was a marvel as a spoilt child of the family and it was difficult to believe that she was a Bengali and not born and bred in Rajasthan. Within the hut, we completed all the scenes in Bombay, including a love scene between the newly married couple, which people felt was daring enough for what they call the "puritan name of K.A. Abbas." Still no one was prepared to buy the picture because of Jalal Agha's short structure. We had to borrow money from a Rajasthani businessman who was interested in making his daughter into a heroine. I politely and diplomatically got his daughter admission in the Film Institute and borrowed one and a quarter lakh rupees at a fixed interest of twenty-five thousand rupees. With this money in my pocket, one fine day we boarded the train which would eventually take us to Jaisalmer. As we were travelling third class and had to make preliminary arrangements for her stay, we persuaded Simi to come by the next day's train.

We hired a couple of rooms in the dak bungalow and an old style house for the whole unit, where we had to follow the camp-like routine of *Saat Hindustani*. Quite a few actors were tricked by my question: "Are you going to stay with me, or are you going to stay with Simi, Jalal Agha and Ramchandra, the cameraman?" Naturally, they thought that the producer-director would have a fancy place for himself and so they landed in our old house, sleeping on the floor. It has been my maxim that the producer-director must stay with the lowliest of the low technicians and not with the stars or the so-called stars. When we went to receive Madam Simi, she got down from the first class compartment of the train all muffled up in a silk gauze draped around her face. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed, "I never knew that a train journey could be so dusty." I said, "Don't worry, there is plenty more sand where we are

going to shoot." "I don't suppose," she said, "there is potable water anywhere available, so I have brought bottles of Bisleri and Coca Cola with me in my ice box.

We left Simi to rest that day and took some shots of Madhu Chhanda wandering alone in the desert in search of water. But we were actually searching for a village which would not be too far away. By evening time, we had found the village. It was three miles away from the road and only jeeps could go across the trackless road. We made arrangements to shoot there and hired a camel driver to bring two "*pakhals*" of water for ten rupees a day. Where he brought the water from was his business and I never dwelt deep into it. As a precaution against contaminated water, I had every member of the unit inoculated against cholera and typhoid. So we were prepared to try any water potable or unpotable.

Every morning the caravan would start off at about 7 a.m. and return by night fall. For the stars we had hired a taxi which would not go further than from where the jeep tracks started. I rode besides the driver, who was an amiable Rajasthani, in the generator truck. The generator was locally hired and was quite cheap. One of the first scenes we shot was the arrival of the "*baraat*," We had about twenty camels and on one of them, Ganga Singh (Jalal Agha) was riding with his bride. Simi was so scared that she would not consent to ride the camel. So we had to use a "duplicate" (Tanya, the daughter of my associate director, Athar Siraj). But next day, when a gallant young officer of the Border Security Force offered her his camel, lo and behold, Madam Simi was riding into the village on his camel, with a well padded saddle.

The monument which had been prepared under the supervision of Mrs Hooja in Jaipur arrived by railway parcel and was duly installed on a sand dune. Next day, however, when we needed them for a scene, we found that in the overnight sand storm they had both fallen down and one was broken. We had to send for cement and a mason from Jaisalmer to do the repairs. Actually, the repaired monument looked appropriately aged and we had to also disfigure the other one to show that it was cracked. After that, we would let them lie flat and bury them in the sand before "packup." Artistically, of course, they were so good that I have not been able to sufficiently

thank the lady sculptor. Besides the faces of the man and the woman the whole legend of their love was engraved on them.

The most spectacular shot that we took and about which we were most nervous was the evacuation of the village. When we talked to the villagers, they understood for they had to evacuate for lack of water every two or three years. The great procession of camels driven by people carrying their entire household was shot with two cameras and in the end only Ganga Singh's family was left standing in the deserted village and, by luck, a wind developed and sand was flying too, as if trailing the caravan.

One phase of our shooting was over, the next phase was at the canal site which was at Suratgarh near Bikaner. Up to here, the canal had only progressed forty miles across Haryana due to the lethargy of the engineers and workers. No one was allowed to take water out of the canal. But still it was impressive and photogenic, the long line of camel carts, the line of donkeys carrying loads of sand from the canal bed to the embankment. There were also occasional tractors, bulldozers and draglines. One of the biggest draglines was sunk deep into the sand and had become useless. Still it could be used for demonstration purposes. That is how we used it. But now a new difficulty arose. The canal was built almost parallel to the border, possibly to serve as a tank trap. Whatever reason it was, the government condition laid down was that we were not to shoot within five miles of the border. It literally meant we were not to shoot at the canal. The engineers were helpless, they were not the final authority. The authority to give us permission lay with the Chief Minister. One night I and Pincho Kapoor got into a car and thanks to the remarkable driving prowess of our driver, we were in Jaipur by morning. Without breakfast we went to see the Chief Minister. He was most cordial and when he knew of our difficulties he ordered the permit to be amended and that we should be given all help for our shooting. It took us a few hours to meet the proper officials who would give us the necessary permission on paper.

Armed with this document, which was like a *carte blanche*, we raced back to Suratgarh, singing all the way to keep the driver and ourselves awake. The unit was waking up when we

returned. There was great jubilation when the unit members heard that we had secured the permission. The first thing we did was to take it to the chief engineer who said that now we could go ahead. We were staying in the club house of the project site with proper beds which were, however, full of bugs in the stringed cots. Water was strictly rationed, but it was available because it could be had from the canal site. The residential colony of engineers where we were staying was like an island in the sea of sand and we were allowed to shoot anywhere we liked. But the canal itself had in many years made little progress. The engineer's office and his bungalow were real. This role was actually written for Amitabh Bachchan who I expected would play it since I thought that it was tailor-made for him. However, the star system came in our way again. Having given the cyclostyled script to Amitabh, I expected that he would read it within a week and if he didn't say "No" that meant he was willing. I ordered his engineer's clothes to be ready. Three days before we were to leave for the location, Amitabh came to see me along with his secretary. I sensed the purpose of his visit. I had handed over the cheque for the balance of his payment for *Saat Hindustani*. Amitabh said that was not necessary. I replied that it may not be necessary for him, but it was very necessary for my self-respect. Ultimately he blurted out, "Mamoojan," as he affectionately continues to call me, "this role doesn't suit me. So I hope to be excused this time." I said that was all right, but if he had informed us earlier it would have been better.

After that, there was a telephone call from Dr Bachchan, who was staying at Sun-n-Sand. Both he and Mrs Bachchan very kindly offered to intercede and force Amitabh to accept the role if his non-playing was going to adversely affect our business. I politely told them that that was not needed. Coming out of their room, I told my boys that from heaven or hell, you have to produce a boy who is six feet two inches tall and thus the way was cleared for Kiran Kumar to step in the shoes of Amitabh Bachchan. The clothes fitted him, but Amitabh was Amitabh and Kiran Kumar was Kiran Kumar. As a result of his playing the "Lambu Engineer" in *Do Boond Pani* he got a number of roles but he couldn't become another Amitabh Bachchan! But he drove his jeep like a demon and I

took full advantage of it as he goes about after hearing some home truths from Jalal Agha, under the influence of liquor, about the position of the haves and the have-nots. Towards the end of the climax there was a scene between the "Lambu Engineer," Kiran Kumar and Ganga Singh, the donkey driver turned tractor driver, Jalal Agha, when Jalal asked what was the reason for the slow progress of the canal for he cannot go back to his village without the canal water. The engineer replies that there will have to be an explosion not only to blast the rocks but to shock the lazy minds of the bureaucrats into activity.

Ganga Singh is killed trying to dynamite the rocks which are impending the progress of the canal and his wife (Simi) and his four year old son, born under stormy conditions while his mother lies alone in the village, are invited to the opening ceremony of the canal without telling the wife that her husband is dead. The poor woman puts on her bridal dress to meet her Ganga and they drive back in the jeep. Ganga Singh's son presses the button, the canal gates are opened and the first water that comes out is red symbolizing the blood of Ganga Singh which had been spilt for it. We had thousands of people lining the bank carrying flags, clusters of balloons were let loose as well as flocks of pigeons to dramatize the occasion. At last Gauri (Simi) sees the vision of her husband coming out of the water with his arms extended towards her and the dacoit Mangal Singh, who had dishonoured himself by raping the sister of Ganga Singh (Madhu Chhanda), throws his rifle into the swirling water. A man, peasant, a citizen of Rajasthan, had been reclaimed. This was the last episode that we filmed and it was a "tour de force" for us to film it in a single day, crowds and all. I had to use a loud speaker all along and still my voice was hoarse from shouting my instructions. Tired as we were, we all still had the feeling that we had helped to achieve something worth-while.

The picture was commercially a flop though many fine words were spoken about it.

We had a gala premiere. But my feeling after hearing the comments of the lumpen proletariat was that the picture would not be successful. Some people were congratulating me, prais-

ing the picture, there was a strange emptiness within me which was not wholly assuaged when we learnt that the picture had won the national award for the best picture on national integration.

46. Battles for Life

Imam Zamin is an old custom among my people. It is a rupee coin sewn into a tape and bound on one's arm. The rupee is supposed to be given in charity at the end of the journey for a favour conferred on one during one's travel. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once had an *Imam Zamin* containing a gold sovereign conspicuously tied on the arm of his white *sherwani*. When asked whether he believed in such hocus-pocus he replied, "No, I don't believe in these superstitions. But," pointing to the late Mrs Zaidi he said, "I believe in the love and affection with which she has prepared it and tied it round my arm."

My mother was also a great believer in the efficacies of an *Imam Zamin* and whenever I went abroad she would see to the safety of her son by tying an *Imam Zamin* containing a rupee coin, thus seek the intervention of the *Imams* (Apostles) in whose name the charity was given.

My first brush with death was in 1929 in the United States of America while driving back from Boston to Poughkeepsie. We were a party of five—Yusuf Meharally the leader of our delegation, Renuka Roy (later to be an MP from Bengal), S.K. Bose who was to become a journalist, myself and the driver.

We had left early in the morning for the four hundred miles round trip and were now driving back. It was past midnight and everyone was feeling sleepy including the driver—a very capable one, indeed.¹ But I was sitting next to him and could not help noticing the sleepy-eyed man at the wheel. To keep him awake I started singing some Haryana folk song which I happened to remember.

"That's a good idea, Sir," said the driver, "Your caterwaul-

¹I cannot drive for the life of me and therefore consider all drivers as supermen.

ing will keep me awake."

Stung to the quick, I abruptly stopped caterwauling, and after sometime of silence, to my horror, saw the car (a brand new Chevrolet) going straight towards the stone pillars of the roadside. And the driver (that superman) was fast asleep. I gave a shout, and acting on an healthy impulse, the driver's feet jammed on the brakes. There was a squelching of tyres but by that time the white stone pillar had gone clean into the bonnet of the car like a cheese-knife cleaving it into two. When we came out I noticed that the stone post, cleaving the bonnet, was only inches away from my face. Instinctively my hand felt the arm of my shirt inside my coat. It was there on my arm. Then I was not quite such a non-believer as I came to be later on.

The aftermath of the near-fatal accident was an anticlimax. The driver led us to an all-night dinner which was not more than half a mile from there, from there he made two phone calls, first to his garage which promised to send a replacement within an hour. Then he phoned his home and said that he had an accident and was safe.

"What about the passengers?" the wife presumably asked him.

"Everyone is O.K. except the one who was sitting by my side as the stone pillar, cutting through the body of the car, miraculously came up to six inches from his nose. It was he whose shouts awakened and saved me."

I did not tell him about the *Imam Zamin*. The diner was full even at that time and someone put a coin in the juke box and a ribald song came out.

Years later, about twenty years later, when I was in India, producing *Bambai Raat ki Bahon Mein* starring Jalal Agha and others, there was a car chase scene in it which I wanted to make the most excitingly realistic car chase scene ever filmed. I hired an imported "Fiat" in which Jalal Agha was fleeing, chased by a police jeep (converted and painted over) and a Riley sports car in which Vimal Ahooja and Surekha were pursuing him along with the jeep.

At one point I wanted to show that the road was under repair, and Jalal, nevertheless, chashed through the barrier. As a followup shot I wanted to show Jalal Agha's car flying through

the air. Persis Khambata was "duplicated" for this shot but Jalal would not accept a duplicate and he told me, "Mamoojan, don't you worry—we'll come out with flying colours. It will be the shot of the century." I placed three cameras at three different angles to cover the flight of the car over the ramp—Jalal secretly arranged to tilt the ramp to about a foot from the six inches that I had allowed. He took a longer start, too.

I had buried an old Bell and Howell camera below the surface of the road so that it could get a worm's eye view.

"God be with you," I said to Jalal. And he showed me a gold medallion with *Allah* engraved on it hanging from his neck. "So long as it is with me, nothing will happen."

I prayed to *Allah*, *Bhagwan*, Life Force, Karl Marx and the guru of my friend Inder Raj Anand, for the life of a valuable human being—Jalal Agha—depended on it.

"Go," I said

And Jalal went roaring over that ramp, high up in the air, where he seemed to be suspended. Would the car survive the shock? Would it land on the ground straight? But Jalal is a driver with a nerve of steels. He stuck to the driving wheel like a leech and landed fifteen feet away from the ramp.

He landed with a thud and we all ran up to him. The guy was laughing, "Did I give you a fright, *Mamoojan*?"

"You sure did, you son of Aghajan—I can't call you son of anything else."

On inspection it was found that all the tyres had burst and there was internal concussion of the machinery which meant very heavy (and very secret) repairs since we had not bargained for such risky shots.

Now I remembered why I had prayed to God or Life Force or Karl Marx. I had said "Let Jalal Agha come out safely today. I will cheerfully face the danger on another day."

I did not know that God or Life Force had such a sharp memory. I thought they would have forgotten the words uttered by a director in a panic.

But I had to pay my debt sooner than I expected. Two cameras had failed to register anything of the car—it had gone too fast for them. The Bell and Howell camera (which we had buried in the ground) as a joke had just sixteen frames (less than one and a half foot) of a streak (of what seemed to be lightning).

The picture was being edited, in the Famous Cine Laboratory, Tardeo. It was a journey of about fifteen miles—taxi fares being exorbitant even then (in 1967) I went daily by bus, changing buses twice.

The stars let me down rather badly. Peter Vidal, one of the Sunday seers, had informed me "Your relations would have to be entertained, humoured and helped. Their interests are going to take up a lot of your time and attention the next three weeks. Holiday plans will come up for discussion—especially so if you are planning to go for a trip."

I remember it rather well for it was on a Sunday afternoon that it happened. The other Sunday paper predicted this for those born under the sign of Gemini, i.e., me. "Changes where you work or in your daily routine prove perplexing at first. Once the week is half over you will adjust yourself and look at this matter in a more optimistic light. If you are still single, or thinking of reorganizing your personal affairs, then you will discover a change of heart in someone you admire."

Only that particular Sunday I did not have time to forget it for before the afternoon was over, I was involved in the nastiest taxi accident—which almost cost me my life—and the stars had not warned me about it in advance!

This was how it happened, and I set it down to set the record straight, for in the newspapers all sorts of things had appeared, all the way ranging from "small bruises" to my being "thrown out" and "rendered unconscious" and "having been identified" and "delivered to my destination."

The first thing to be set straight is that I did not take the taxi from my Juhu residence. I never intended to take a taxi. I took a bus to Ghodbunder Road, where I changed to a D bus. I got on the upper deck and was engrossed in *Time* magazine's article on China. Half an hour later I looked out and found myself only at Mahim. The bus was a "lame duck" and was cruising at a speed of not more than four miles per hour. Any moment it might be declared unfit for further transportation, and I had an appointment with my film editor in the laboratory. I got down and took the only cab at the rank.

Now, by long-standing habit, the first thing I said to the driver was to drive slow—I said I was not in a hurry, though as a matter of fact I was. The next moment I was engrossed

in the doings of Mao and Chou.

Near the Worli corner I felt the taxi driver was going too fast. I looked up from the paper long enough to notice the speed—it was about forty-five miles—and to instruct the driver to go slow. Then I resumed my reading of the article on China.

The next thing—or the next things—I saw was a quick series of flashes. The taxi speeding at a peculiar angle. The stones of the traffic island looming large and ominous. Then a lamppost came crazily in view and barred the way. There was a shattering of glass and of metal. The taxi jumped several feet and then landed with a thud. Then there was silence. It all happened in a fraction of a second—no time to react. I only knew I must get out. So since the door next to me was jammed, I stepped through the front door which was ajar.

This must be death. I felt no pain. I saw the unconscious body of the driver lying sprawled half in and half out of the taxi. I had no difficulty in walking though the right foot felt funny.

“Are you all right, uncle?” I heard a teenaged angel.

“Yes, I guess I am,” I replied and wondered why she insisted on escorting me to the other side of the road.

I walked, rather I floated in spite of the funny feeling in my right foot. To all intents and purposes I was unseen by the crowd that was gathering round the accident site.

The angel led me to her car and I got in without a word. I was surrounded on all sides by teenaged angels. Before starting the car, the angel who was driving asked me, “Did you have something in the taxi?”

I vaguely remembered the *Time* magazine, but it was not worth an angel’s trouble. Then I remembered my camel hair coat that lay by my side. “Yes, my coat” I replied and the words sounded funny, too. They seemed to have come out of another pair of lips. One of the angels got out and presently came back with the coat. I possessively clutched at it. It won’t do to appear before God wearing a mustard coloured tie but coatless. Then the car moved, still unseen by the crowd that seemed to be quite irrelevantly clustered round the taxi. I had nothing to do with it.

One of the angels said, “Where shall we drive you, Sir—what’s your address?”

Try as I might, I could not remember my address.

Then the angel asked me, "What's your name?"

I whispered, "I don't know." In death all are anonymous. I was not even surprised by the fact of not knowing my name. It seemed natural.

But the angels were perturbed. One of them asked, "Do you want a glass of water?" It was too much effort to say no, so I nodded my head.

They stopped the car near an Irani restaurant and called a *baharwala*. He rattled off a long list of "Murgi-chop-mutton-chop-masala-fry—Coca-cola—Mangola—" but the angels only asked for a glass of water. Do they have Irani restaurants and *baharwalas* in the other world, too? I was pondering this question when the glass of water was brought. Curiously enough there was no strength in my hands, and I let an angel hold the glass to my parched lips.

As I drained that glass of water, it happened. I came back to life. I looked at my watch. It was ticking. The time was one minute to four. The angels were only kindhearted teenaged girls, one of whom was driving. My identity was restored—I told them my name. And there was a terrible pain in my ribs. "I think I have broken my ribs," I said.

"Do you know what happened?" No, I didn't. I had only that last fleeting glimpse of the crazy lamppost.

The teenaged girls (God bless them) dropped me at Inder's place on Warden Road. They offered to escort me to the flat but I said I was OK. So, clutching my coat with one hand, holding the broken ribs with the other, I bravely climbed the stairs to the lift—to find it out of order. I looked down. The teenaged angels in the car were gone. So I began limping up—floor by floor. My right foot was sprained and seemed to be loaded with lead. Second floor. My left shin was bleeding. Third floor. My left ribs were paining. Fourth floor. My right arm was bleeding. At last I rang the bell.

"There was an accident," I declared rather sheepishly.

"Where?" My friend asked.

"Not where but to whom? To me." And I lay down on the *divan* but (anticlimax) I did not pass out. . . .

A week had passed. The X-rays showed four fractures. The doctors said I was doing fine. I could not but agree. I was "strapped" (sounds too much like put in a straitjacket!) on the

chest—the ribs had to be given time to repair themselves. The tail-bone had a bruise which hurt, because man no longer swung by his tail. Any change of position was painful. Sitting was worse than lying, and lying was worse than sitting. Sleep was possible only with the help of sleeping pills. They were giving tablets and capsules to deaden the pain, and the feeling I got reminded me of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who asked me once during his illness, “Have you taken antibiotics?” When I said yes, he added, “Don’t you think the drugs are worse than the disease?”

There was some sort of moral to it all—life triumphs over pain, or pain triumphs over life, or humanity above all, or antibiotics *zindabad*—but I was too drugged and dizzy to sort it out. . . .

The plaster bandages were taken off (after excruciating torture) after six weeks.

The driver died—poor fellow. The issue of *Time* with the portrait of Mao and the dragon could not be held responsible for the poor driver’s death for he was a simple-minded young man. I alone was responsible for risking Jalal Agha’s life for a silly shot of only sixteen frames of a streak of lightening. So don’t read any mystical message into this episode which is written here for episode’s sake.

“Don’t travel on a Tuesday” is an old, old superstition which I must have defied dozens of times—even before I knew about the superstition.

After *Shehar aur Sapna*’s artistic success, our whole team was leaving—and the day was Tuesday.

My adopted sister did her best to persuade me either to go on Monday or Wednesday. But Air France, who were our carriers, had a plane from Delhi on Wednesday morning and wanted us to have a day free at their cost in Delhi when they would arrange a Press reception. They wanted to make a big thing of it—the departure of the Indian delegation to Karlovy Vary. So we pooh-poohed the idea of Tuesday being unlucky. (It was supposed to be specially unlucky for me—I don’t know how or why.) We took an Air India plane—the one and half hour’s flight to Delhi and started off in high spirits. But it was the season of fog and when we reached Delhi we groped

for a long time in the dense mist over Delhi. I happened to be sitting on the window seat, and once I saw the plane descending through a small break in the layers of mist and going down like a kite—it almost touched the ground but (as we were to learn later) overshot the runway, taking off again with the roar of its engines. Only I saw how near we were to disaster if we had made a landing and later I congratulated the pilot for his presence of mind. Tuesday, that was certainly a close shave for us. We were told that the plane was going back to Bombay and, lo and behold, all the friends who had come to see us off were there to greet us for they had learnt the plane was coming back. We missed the Air France party in Delhi (for which Delhi journalists had already been invited) but also missed the “French connection” completely. We had to take an Air India plane that night which dropped us at Prague.

47. Yoga Inc. and Yoga

Thirty-nine years ago, I arrived in America from the East, and saw Los Angeles before New York. I had heard much about the Swamis of Hollywood and was curious to see their "temples."

Actually, from outside it looked like a mosque. Imitation Taj Mahal architecture. The arched doorways and windows were Saracenic, the latticed work was plagiarized from the Taj Mahal. A big Chinese chandelier threw the entrance hall into dramatic light and shade, a precursor of the latter-day psychodelic light. On the walls were portraits of the holy men of the Himalayas. A truly-Oriental atmosphere, if hopelessly mixed.

What does it matter if the setting is a little incongruous for those who don't know the difference between one part of Orient from another, but what difference it made to the Hollywood tycoons who introduced their hero in a motion picture called *Son of India*, as "Abdel Karim, the son of a High caste Hindu?"

About a hundred people were present when the proceedings began, but more cars were arriving, bringing in members, mostly women. Most of the people belonged to the affluent class but there was a man in blue overalls sitting next to me. I told myself there must be a true seeker of spiritual guidance.

"What brings you here, my friend?" I asked him as gently as possible.

"The Swami guy sure can speak nicely. Then there is the music and the movies. A chance to go to Heaven. And it's all free. Where is America can I get free entertainment?"

The proceedings began with the appearance of the Swami himself. If I was expecting him to be a bearded ascetic in a loin cloth, I was mistaken. In his flowing silken robes he was more like Ramon Novarro in *Son of India* or a glib-tongued Gogia Pasha. After a harp recital, the lady appeared on the stage to recount her experiences of India, "that glorious land

of mysticism and romance!" She spoke of the ethereal beauty of sunset over Kinchinjunga, the "glamorous architecture of that immortal memorial to Love—Taj Mahal," the serene wisdom of the great saints and *rishis* whom she had seen meditating in the caves of Amarnath and the "simple but lofty life of the Indian peasants." Simple and lofty, indeed! I thought of the poverty-stricken villages, the famines and the epidemics, the droughts and the floods, the usurers and the landlords, the squalor of the slums. I thought of millions of my countrymen who got only one meal per day. Yet, what did it matter if this noble lady, stepping down from her first-class cabin on a luxury liner, had certified that their lives were "simple but lofty?" And I wondered if it was better to be slandered by Katherine Mayo or be so gushingly misrepresented by this obviously sincere lady who went to India with such fixed notions that she saw nothing but the beauty of the landscape and the spiritual greatness of the sages?

The proceedings that evening came to a close with prayers and circulation of the basket "*for collections*" and I did not blame my over-alled friend for *leaving* the hall just in time to miss these two items of the programme. The business of the day over, the Swami now clad in a gleaming white suit obviously made by some Fifth Avenue tailor, walked away with his American wife!

Fairly wide-spread interest in Yoga and Eastern religions was but a manifestation of the spiritual unrest in America, as the hippies are today. Material progress, without any moral or ethical values, and the *wars* have not been sufficient. You cannot worship Mammon for ever. Even though the Get-rich-quick financier keeps himself busy by amassing dollars on the Stock Exchange, his wife, forced to lead a life of indolence at home without the benefits of education or culture, which may have provided her with useful pastimes, naturally feels dissatisfied with life. Wife-swapping and gang bangs are later phenomenon. She is the prey of all faddists, quacks and dope-merchants. She finances all strange cults and crazy movements. Sometimes she turns to the first Oriental religion she hears of. Hinduism or Sahaism. For, here is not only spiritual salvation but also the glamour and exotica which she has been brought up to associate with the East. Her interest in Yoga or Hinduism

or Islam is not a matter for enthusiasm amongst the followers of the faith of her choice. It is, often, a psychological—or even physiological—phenomenon.

Next time I was in the United States was in 1966 at the Santa Barbara Film Festival. I got down from my plane at Los Angeles and was met by the wife of the Director of the Festival who drove me to Santa Barbara and kept on talking about India and “the great lady.” (Is she really the wife of Mr Gandy?) Simultaneously she was manipulating the car through thick home-going traffic to the L.A. suburbs. I was scared a couple of times but I was going to risk my life but would not show that an Indian is scared of fast-driving cars.

The good lady was very curious about India, about the Swamis and the Gurus. Could I recommend her the real Guru in Los Angeles? She was spending thousands of dollars going to psychiatrists and they were not giving her the peace that she craved. “It’s spoiling my work. Unless I get a good Guru, I will be ruined.”

“What work do you do?”

“Oh, I thought you guessed it by now. I am a Hollywood actress.” When she told me her screen name I hazily remembered a lesser known actress in one of those roles that called for a good figure (which she possessed) rather than any dramatic talent.

She got me to Santa Barbara in time for me to be installed in my suite (along with Government of India’s PRO S.K. Dhar) and to answer the call from Raj Kapoor all the way from Honolulu where he was shooting with Mr Pachhi’s *Round The World in Eight Dollars*.

When I met the Director of the Festival, I thanked him for the fast pace at which his wife had brought me but he was not very enthusiastic. He tapped his forehead and said, “She won’t be my wife. I think by the time the Festival ends, we may be separated.”

I said I only wanted to warn him against her dangerous driving. He just shrugged his shoulders.

My film *Hamara Ghar* (which I had taken with me) was well-appreciated by an audience of American children. There were two juries—one composed of children only. A certain Federal Social Worker who, since the Walts riots, was working in Walts,

for several months, asked for my permission to take the picture to Walts to show to a mixed gathering. The picture was shown to an audience of Black and White children and then they were involved in a similar picture made there. The show, I understood, was a grand success. It was much more than Second Prize that the picture received in the Festival.

In Santa Barbara, I attended many Indianophiles who insisted on my coming to their houses for dinner or lunch. In one of these get-togethers I met the inevitable Yoga enthusiast.

At least one man I met seemed to think that Yoga, Inc. could be made into as great a business proposition as Ford's automobiles or Rockefeller's oil. He is a hotel-owner-cum-physical-culturist-cum-student of Yoga, who lives on an estate in the suburbs of Los Angeles. A pseudo-Oriental atmosphere pervades his hotel. Statues of Buddha and Persian carpets! Himself a typical cigar-chewing American businessman, he is a great believer in the future of Yoga in America.

"Yep," he said, as he propounded to me his scheme of spreading Yoga in the land of the dollar, "there is great scope for Yoga in this country. But one must organize it properly. Send me a Swami with proper credentials from India, a Swami with a big name, and then see what I can do with him. I see a huge net-work of Yoga centres for spiritual uplift as well as physical healing, Yoga magazines, Yoga restaurants for vegetarian food, Yoga camps for the holidays . . . Gee, there are millions in it, if only it is properly organized."

In India, soon after, I was struck by the Rasputin-like countenance of a Guru who called himself an Acharya because he was once a Professor in a college. His portrait was plastered all over the city under the provocative title in Hindi and English *Samajvad se Savdhan* (Beware of Socialism). It was the year of Lenin's Centenary. I was drawn by that title and that mesmeric appearance to attend the evening meeting which was well-attended and well-organized. It was organized on a modern style. It was the atmosphere of a revivalist meeting in an American city. There were stalls selling portraits, books and pamphlets by the Acharya himself. I saw a few film people and they were more surprised to see me there than I was to see them there. When he started to speak, after a *kirtan* sung by ladies, it was apparent that he was well-read and spoke like an intellectual.

The discourse was the usual clap-trap of anti-Sovietism and anti-Public Sectarism, but since the audience consisted mostly of well-to-do people it brought applause. Later I made enquiries and learnt that the white-clad Acharya was staying in a posh flat (costing several lakhs—a point of enquiry for the Income Tax authorities)—and he was driven in an imported car by a saffron-clad charming and fair lady.

His oratorical performance had a certain hypnotic quality, while his rage against socialism reminded one of Rasputin, who also a hundred years ago, made mystical and spiritual claims and made similar accusations against Marx. More and more film people were drawn to him by his intellectual talk and his anti-socialist slant which he gave to the most spiritual topics. I felt he was in the wrong country. He should have been in America—had he been there—he might have been sent from there along with a covey of American disciples. I became curious about him and made new enquiries and even bought a couple of books by him. This is what I read in his *Meditation Experiment*:

FIRST STAGE: 10 MINUTES OF FAST, DEEP BREATHING

Be relaxed in a standing position with the eyes closed. Begin breathing (through the nose) as strong, as deep, and as fast as possible. Go on breathing intensely for a full ten minutes

SECOND STAGE: 10 MINUTES. COOPERATE WITH THE REACTIONS OF THE BODY AND THE EMOTIONS. LET GO COMPLETELY

The fast and deep breathing will continue automatically. Meanwhile the body and mind will begin to move. Do not *control* the reactions. *Cooperate completely with your body.* The movements will take many forms; don't suppress them. Let whatsoever happens happen. *Jump, dance, weep, shout, laugh, anything you like. Let out all the madness inside. Express what you feel completely.* The body will take its own course so don't interfere with its movements. Be a witness to the process

THIRD STAGE: 10 MINUTES OF SHOUTING HOO—HOO—HOO—HOO

While the chaotic process goes on, start hammering on your

psychic centre's by shouting HOO—HOO—HOO—HOO. . . . Now you will become an open flow of energy, your life force will move in an upward stream bringing the consciousness to the peak of energy

FOURTH STAGE: 10 MINUTES DEEP RELAXATION. NO MOVEMENT—JUST SILENCE AND WAITING. BE A AS DEAD MAN. TOTALLY LET GO OF YOUR MIND AND BODY

The body has dropped down. All tensions are completely exhausted. You can sit or lie down. But now be relaxed completely, and be empty. Leave everything and just remain as you are. This is the moment of non-doing, neither breathing, nor movement. Just silence.

He had spiritual camps at which the devotees sang and danced in a fury of reminiscent of the Dancing Darvishes of Iran. In fact he often referred to the legends of Mulla Nasruddin and mixed Sufi teachings in his discourses. He is an intellectual no doubt, but so far he has refrained from a straight disputation with a real Communist or a real Socialist. His gospel is a Mixture of Vedanta, Bhagwat Gita, the Sufistic teachings and the Testament of Christ without the humanity, humanity and compassion of any of them—something for everybody! Plus the exotic freedom to participate in Tantric orgies in which the disciples (men and women) let themselves go—chanting, dancing, yelling, laughing or crying which he calls the outward manifestation of a man's inner repressions.

Meanwhile he was elevated himself to Godhood and is called Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Now he has shifted his Headquarters to a big mansion in Poona's aristocratic locality.

Foreign hippies are attached to his Ashram and a Japanese girl has made certain sensational allegations in which she says that Black Magic or Tantric tricks were used to seduce a girl. (I have personally read her letter which she wrote to a friend seen at the Acharya's place.) Some of his *chelas* (some say he himself) was arrested for peddling narcotics. His Yoga has a Tantric edge to it which appeals to exotica-loving film people. Quite a number of film stars wear saffron robes and wear his medallion on their persons, which does not mean that the themes of their films have to be spiritual. It is, rather, a licence to make

the kind of films they are producing. Yogis, Acharyas, Gurus, etc. are proliferating like mushrooms in India as well as abroad.

Then there is *Baba*—otherwise known as Muktananda of Vajreshwari Ashram. I met him once at my friend Inder Raj Anand's house. The hour was pre-dawn. There were baskets of fruits and sweets, he just touched them and they became the blessed *prasad*. Everyone was kneeling or prostrating. I alone did a simple *namaskar* and even shook hands with him. I did not feel any supra-natural vibrations. But I was touched by his simplicity and humility.

Once Inder dragged me to his Ashram and there when I saw the photographs of film stars and corrupt politicians, I was disillusioned not so much by Baba allowing himself to be photographed with them but by their cleverness in exploiting even the sacred precincts. Every day, some rich devotee bears the expenses of the simple vegetarian *Langar* for thousands of people who congregate there.

A certain film star who had struck very low happened to prosper after having the *darshan* of Baba. That became a legend of success—everyone who wanted his film to succeed had just to perform his *mahurat* in the Ashram. Baba's portrait and medallion, too, became popular in the film industry—everyone is wearing either the anti-socialist Acharya's medallion or the Baba's portrait round his neck. Superstition and faith have always been rampant in the film world. But about Baba there is an aura of silent goodness though I did not personally notice it—he is not an intellectual though he can speak on any subject in Hindi or Kanarese. There is an elephant in the Ashram which is run more like a colony of do-gooders than an esoteric place, people come there to meditate, and find peace there even if the Baba is not physically present. Why do rich people specially gravitate to him? There is another question I would like to ask.

Bhiwandi is only a few miles from the Ashram and yet when it was burning and a communal riot was raging, mostly the victims were the members of the minority community, why didn't Baba use his spiritual influence to bring peace to Bhiwandi? Is it more important to rouse the *Kundalini* in the hearts of the rich or to put to sleep the serpent of communalism in the bitter hearts of the poor people of Bhiwandi? When I get the answer to these two questions I will bow and kneel, before

Baba for, of all the pseudo-saints and Acharyas who may be providing spiritual sanctuary to CIA agents, I have found Baba alone who does a lot of good to the tribals of his neighbourhood, has built a school for them, provided them blankets out of the donations of his devotees. Of all the people I know he alone exudes goodness, just goodness. But those two questions gnaw at my heart.

Baba, my friend Inder tells me, always enquires about me. I don't disbelieve him. My conversion would be the biggest catch of all. But Baba says he could see spiritual and humanitarian vibrations all around me. Once he said "You mark my words. Abbas will be a big saint one day. I would not give my *langoti* (loin cloth) to the poor, but he will not even spare that." I won't say I was not flattered to hear that.

At the moment Baba is in America. For the last one year he has been there. He has established an Ashram there in Cleveland, California. There are miraculous legends—a cancer patient in Bombay has got cured just by letting Baba's cow lick his wound with her tongue. Baba has been interviewed by a galaxy of eminent intellectuals including Allan Ginsberg and the astronauts and the editor of the *Psychic Times*. I hope he has not been caught in the net of Yoga, Inc.

The Baba says he does not believe in any religion, yet his Ashram observes all the Hindu rituals. What it means, perhaps, is that he is a universalist like Bhakt Kabir. Once my elder sister went to the Ashram and when the time of prayer came she asked where she could perform her *namaaz*. Baba immediately sent her to the underground hall of Meditation and there my sister performed her *namaaz* and felt the presence of God!

Why the rich are drawn to him? What do they seek and get from him? There are tycoons of all kinds, textile mill-owners are only some of them, film stars and other kinds of millionaires, both Indian and foreign, including a German industrialist. Why don't the poor and the people of the middle class come to him? Perhaps they are not so troubled in their conscience.

¶ Of Baba's miracles the one to which I, as a writer, give most importance is the miracle of having written a book of 241 pages in just three weeks—working six to seven hours per day—in the cool and bracing climate of Mahabaleshwar. This book, translated into English, is called *Chitshakti Vilas*. (The Play of

Consciousness) which is a kind of spiritual autobiography. It is signed by (or dedicated to) "Your own, My worshipful Sri Nityananda's own, *Swami Muktananda*."¹

In this book, Baba says:

This is my prayer to Gurudev:

May everyone's life be a paradise

Bless me that I may adore thee with the awareness of the
Self of all;

May I abandon distinctions of caste, creed and language,
and cleanse my mind

Let me see thee in the high and the low, the suffering and
the needy, the noble and the foolish.

Grant me a heart free from vanity, simple and munificent

May I always live in Ganeshpuri

Raise me above the differences of nation, language, sect
and race.

Grant me the vision of equality

It is a poem of rare humility and humanity to which Baba is dedicated. Baba claims to be no intellectual and speaks no language but his own (Hindi, Marathi and Kanarese) but in his devotion to goodness he is the equal of the greatest intellectuals.

His other human quality (besides the spiritual qualities which he may or may not possess) is a sense of utter cleanliness—the Ashram is a model of cleanliness which is all due to Baba—and of unbounded love for everything which God (or Nature) has created—be it human beings, animals, flowers and fruits or common vegetation. For a man of over seventy Baba looks young enough to be sixty—and his skin shines with purity of body. Eating less than a morsel, it is remarkable that this great man can manage his vast Ashram, look to the needs of hundreds who gather there every Sunday or festival day—it is the same in Ganeshpuri (which I have visited) and, I believe, it is the same in Cleveland.

When I went to the Yoga Centre in Santa Cruz (East) for a

¹Shri Nityananda was the Guru of Muktananda.

physical course after my recent illness, I heard of the old Swami's younger son who married an Australian girl and has now settled down in Australia near a big prison where everyone is at least a Lifer. They have been sentenced for rape, murder, robbery with violence, etc. This young couple have opened a Yoga Centre for the redemption of prisoners there. Evidently I am worse than these criminals. For they have been reformed and I am still a prisoner of my restless thought—despite daily doses of Yoga.

48. In the Land of the Pure

My resounding declaration (in an article) that I would not go to Pakistan did not apply to casual visits as a tourist but it was misunderstood as such by some people in both the new countries.

In 1955 and 1956, since I started negotiations for our Indo-Soviet co-production, I and my wife had many opportunities to go to Moscow via England. In the big melting pot of London we met quite a few friends and relations including a cousin of mine who lived with her husband who was attached to the Pakistan High Commission. One thing led to another and it was proposed that next time I went to Russia I should try for a visa for Pakistan.

Unfortunately, my surname is Abbas which alphabetically places me at the top of the list of undesirable aliens who were not to be given a visa for Pakistan. This is what I was told when I applied at the high commission in Moscow. The consulate staff even showed me the list with my name at the top: Abbas, Khwaja Ahmad, suspected communist. On my return from England I recounted this casually to my relations. One of them had a friend working in Pakistan International Airlines. He said there was no harm in trying and he telephoned him. He told him that he had got a likely passenger for him. He is an Indian, he said casually, but he would travel first class. This was a bait that few in the airlines business refused to bite.

I went to the office of PIA and sent in my name. The manager came out to see me. He was a very courteous man. He said, "You know about the prohibition, of course, but I would tell you that we are not supposed to ask questions of first class passengers." I gladly shelled out the money. "Now you will get the transit visa along with your ticket."

"For how many days?" I asked naively.

He explained, "The transit visa was only for twenty-four hours."

Luckily an IAC flight to Bombay was to leave just fifteen minutes before the arrival of my plane from London. So I thanked my stars for the twenty-three hours and forty-five minutes in which I could at least see my sister. The PIA planes are much smaller than those of Air India International, but the uniforms of the hostesses created by Pierre Cardin of Paris would definitely be smarter and more appropriate for an oriental country.

The next day we took the PIA plane from Heathrow airport in London. After brief stopovers in Rome and Baghdad, we sighted the desert of Sindh and there I had to agree that geographically West Pakistan belonged to the Middle East while the eastern wing (now Bangladesh) belonged to south-east Asia. As we were descending I saw my first Pakistani camel and wondered if it really belonged to Vice President Johnson's favourite camel driver in Pakistan, who was much talked about in *Time* and *Newsweek*. And so we were in Karachi. I showed my passport, it was duly stamped and the clerk told me that he hoped I would have a pleasant stay till my IAC flight left next morning. I was taken to a room on the first floor which was built in the dak bungalow architecture of prepartition days, changing some money I tipped ten rupees to my attendant. "Always tip them first and see the courtesy later," a fellow passenger had advised me.

I was allowed to telephone my sister and within half an hour a host of friends and relations were at the airport, with special permission to take me home and taking the responsibility for my "safety," which meant I was not to create any mischief. Karachi proved to be a sprawling dusty city. Construction was going on everywhere. In about thirty minutes we were in my brother-in-law's house in the Pakistan Employees Housing Society. This is a marvel of construction. Out of dusty wasteland, rows of bungalows and *kothis* had arisen and the landmark of my sister's house was the Khayyam cinema. Here we spent the rest of the afternoon amidst friends and relatives arriving and departing. Here we slept (as of old) under the starry sky. Only once the silhouette of a policeman disturbed us but the poor man had come to enquire what time

I should be reaching the airport and if I had any intention of addressing a public meeting, which was farthest from my thought. They don't take any chances with visitors like me in Pakistan.

My second visit to Pakistan was no less dramatic. This time the initiative had come from my wife. We were in Moscow and it was typically affectionate of Mr and Mrs K.P.S. Menon to add our two names to every guest list, however small or big. One day we found the only other guest to be the charge d' affaires of Pakistan who happened to be a young and handsome Bengali. We thought we could make a formal application for a visa for the two of us.

Our application was just as formally rejected.

Then another angle was open for us. We filed a fresh application—Mujji writing in my application and I hers so the handwriting was not the same nor were the names and professions. I was A.A. Khwaja, my profession was "business" and I just wanted a day in Karachi to establish some contacts to supply something or the other. The application was processed in Moscow and was duly passed. At the end of our stay in Moscow, we went to London, stayed there for a week (doubtless to make more business contacts) and then arrived in Karachi, duly welcomed by dozens of our relations and friends. We had sent cables in advance signed "Khwajas" and the people we wanted to meet only came to see us. The IAC was still the daily connection and we were there only for one day in Transit. The Indian Airlines plane still left at 10-40 a.m. and we still arrived at eleven.

That evening I was entertained to a dinner such as I had never had. It was at the bungalow of a judge, so no one could suspect it. The guards were there, but the servants had been given leave for that night. All my friends were there—even the joint secretary who admitted (rather shamefacedly) that it was his unpleasant duty to issue orders for the rejection of my application. But they all came to see me—and, more so, my wife—their own wives had only heard of me and our Aligarh adventures together. They had grown prosperous, and had the obesity which goes with affluence. My plainly-dressed wife made quite a contrast in the midst of the glamorously-dressed

Pakistani ladies: At last, at about eleven, the dinner was served and eaten. The food, which was all cooked by the ladies, was excellent—better than any I could have got at the Intercontinental Hotel! By unspoken convention, no politics could be discussed. Except, perhaps once when an East Pakistani railway official said something about the situation being explosive in his country. But it was only whispered and I was honour bound not to repeat it in my *Last Page*. The whole function was hushhush and off the record. I hadn't been there. They had not known of my arrival and of course made no attempt to meet me. But it did prove that the fraternity of Aligs surpasses Pakistan's hostility for India.

The third time I was there was as a *baraati* of my nephew, Anwar (of AI) who was going to be married to his childhood sweetheart, Nadira, daughter of my sister and my agronomist brother-in-law. Visas were applied for months in advance. We had been promised them in advance.

To give the *baraat* secular significance we had sought permission to include two Hindus. Sham (Mrs Inder Raj Anand, virtually a member of our family) and a lad named Ghanshyam (an assistant of mine who claimed a right to be included in the party because he was born in Karachi, and migrated to India in 1948). We thought an enlightened ambassador like Syed Sajjad Hyder, would see the point of our idea of a secular *baraat*. However, when we reached Delhi station, where we hoped to collect our passports from our relation, we were happy to receive the whole bundle but were told two were missing—Ghanshyam's and mine. Ghanshyam was on the point of tears but I consoled him that even I was not going and then with a lackluster smile accepted the inevitable.

Ghanshyam was the life and soul of the party, and I was in any case the senior-most member of the party. The train gave a whistle and took away the *baraat* to the border between Lahore and Amritsar as they planned to complete the journey to Karachi by train. I and Ghanshyam returned to Bombay and now it was my duty to entertain Ghanshyam who was supposed to be the general entertainment. As the *baraat* trudged by train I kept the telephone wires humming between Bombay and Delhi. At last, on the last day I flew to Karachi

and arrived there a few hours before the *Nikah* ceremony. The East African Airways flight was to leave at about midnight, and the last plane from Delhi was to arrive a few minutes earlier, so it was all a matter of touch and go. But the waves of fate clicked somewhere and it was go for me only. Poor Ghanshyam was again left behind, the only soul who could see me off. Bombay to Karachi is even less than Bombay to Delhi and by the time we had done justice to the tea and snacks and the charming black hostesses cleared the trays, the lights of Karachi could already be seen, and we were descending on the runway.

My luggage was subjected to non-customary Customs examination. The most subversive thing that I had was the latest copy of *Blitz* which soon disappeared page by page among the Customs officers. The next was a coloured film magazine which was almost torn to shreds before the Customs officer impounded it—for further and elaborate scrutiny. My arrival was un-expected, therefore there was no one to receive me. When an immigration officer asked me what was the purpose of my visit I replied, "To legally kidnap a Pakistani girl."

Then I put before him the invitation card of the marriage ceremony, and invited him to come to the wedding. He caught the joke and joined in the laughter. I told the taxi driver I had to go to a house in Pechs, the number of which I had forgotten, but it was near Khayyam cinema. Racing along the lonely road we were soon in Pechs which itself, I now found, had grown to be a gigantic city. Luckily the Khayyam cinema was spotted and two houses earlier I heard the sounds of girlish laughter and immature voices raised in song to the accompaniment of a drum being amateurishly beaten. "That's it," I said. "But, Sir, Khayyam cinema is still ahead." I said, "Damn Khayyam cinema. This is where I want to go."

It was the house of my brother-in-law and the marriage songs were being sung by my nieces and grandnieces. There was a tumultuous reception accorded to me for arriving so dramatically, though the element of surprise was not there since they had already received a telephone call from the airport from one of their spys. I sat down in the midst of the singers and joined in the singing the traditional marriage song. At 4 a.m. I got up and encouraged the general disbursement of guests to

their sleeping quarters.

The next day I got up at about eleven and after a late brunch went through the programme and the list of invitations. Some of my very old friends had been forgotten. I took my brother-in-law's car and his son with me and personally went to invite my friends.

The donkey driven vehicle—the *gadha gari*—is the most popular vehicle of Karachi. Petrol was expensive when we were there and taxis were scarce. When at night we went to the theatre district it might have been in Chandni Chowk or Lamington Road. The election was going to be fought between the Jamaat-e-Islami (Socialism *Kufur Hai*) and Mr Bhutto's People's Party (Socialism *Lakar Rahengay*). The war of posters was on. This was the election campaign to which we were supposed to lend support.

The marriage was solemnized in the traditional manner. The bride and the groom sat separately and the "proposal" and "acceptance" were both done through "agents" who were the elders of the two families.

The occasion was also a grand get together of old Aligarians, some of whom had not seen each other for years though they were living in Karachi.

I was invited to numerous dinners and lunches most of which I had reluctantly to refuse. But I accepted the invitation to a party given by the journalists of Karachi, some of whom were hoping that I would refuse but to their disappointment I did not. Also our embassy people were anxious to give a reception in honour of me and the bridal couple which, of course, we had to accept.

At the journalist party I was invited to speak after a brief and colourless informal speech by the president welcoming me on behalf of the Karachi Journalists. I was prepared for this confrontation but I took the initiative and the offensive. I said, "For an Indian it is a rare privilege to meet and talk to so many brother writers and journalist friends of Pakistan. But I find that there is a general hesitation, a kind of embarrassment. The cause of this embarrassment is supposed to be the two or three puny little wars that we have fought. I will not go into the merits or demerits of these wars. After all there was never a greater war fought as was fought between Nazi

Germany and the Soviet Union or between Japan and America. But that doesn't prevent them from talking to each other. And at the present moment thousands of German tourists are hobnobbing with Russian proletarians and many more Britons are in Germany as friendly tourists and yet there was a time when Hitler had threatened to obliterate all the cities of England.

"That threat of Hitler and his deeds specially obliterating Stalingrad and Leningrad, Moscow and Minsk, does not prevent the Russians from having normal relations with descendants of Nazi Germany that is West Germany. Nor does Pearl Harbour and the treacherous attack on it by militarist Japan prevent America or Americans to stop trade talks with Japan and a flourishing tourist trade between the two countries. After all Americans rained atom bombs and now the same Americans are raining dollars on the same Japan. Why should the two or three minor wars between us stand in the way of normalizing our relations? Why should they prevent us from talking to each other? After all we are not two ordinary countries. We were once one country, though there are some people in Pakistan who don't want to be reminded of it. But historical facts are historical facts. We have no less than five common languages—Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati and Sindhi.¹

"Take an Urdu magazine published in Pakistan. Even now you will find the best stories and articles by Indian writers. We give equal respects to the same sufis and saints. If I succeed in bringing Lata Mangeshkar there will be a stampede in Karachi as lakhs love to hear her. The same would happen if you send Noorjehan to India. A hundred thousand copies of *Diwan-e-Ghalib*, several editions ranging in prices of one rupee to hundred twenty-five rupees were sold in the Ghalib centenary year. I do not know how many you published. During the last cricket season the Pakistan team was invited on the same evening by two persons. A Hindu Punjabi film star and a rich Muslim seth. They preferred to go to their Punjabi-speaking compatriot even if he was a Hindu.

"The fact is, my dear friends, that while wars divide us

¹This was much before the establishment of Bangladesh.

there are too many other things that bring us together. Let us remember these unifying factors and forget the wars, as the whole world is forgetting the world wars.”

I wouldn't say these remarks were greeted with a tumultuous reception but I could sense a thoughtful and friendlier reaction mixed with a little applause.

Next day our meeting got big press coverage, most of which were factual, but some of which were untrue. *Jasaarat*, Jamat-e-Islami's paper had a screaming six-column headline which proclaimed:

Bharat Has Opened An Anti-Pakistan Front Through Communist Litterateurs—Mysterious Mission of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas.

As proof, they published a photograph of my old Aligarh friend, Sibtey Hasan, and myself with the caption:

Pakistani Communist writer Sibtey Hasan and Indian Communist writer Khwaja Ahmad Abbas caught whispering to each other.

(Actually, while the picture was taken, we were referring to our common friends in Lahore.)

The same paper published a news agency report under the heading: “Condemnation of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas’ statement regarding Kashmir. The Government should keep a strict watch over Indian Agent’s demands ‘Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference’.” (This was with reference to my statement that at least one state of India—Jammu and Kashmir—had adopted Urdu.)

The *Mashriq Daily* demanded in a headline that Khwaja Ahmad Abbas should be turned out of Pakistan. (The article appeared too late. Meanwhile the bird had flown away.)

Next day at the Indian embassy cocktail party, there was the usual cocktail crowd in which everyone was speaking at once. But it was a friendly crowd and there was much hugging and embracing each other. The Assistant High Commissioner Mr K.N. Bakhshi told me that such a successful function had not been held for many years. As many people continued to

ask me the purpose of my visit I had to prosaically inform them that I had come for the marriage of my niece from Pakistan to my nephew from my India. Today I wish I could answer them in words of the popular song:

"Lay jaengay,

"Lay jaengay,

"Dilwale

"Dulhaniya lay jaengay."

49. The Emergency

For me the EMERGENCY began at about the same time, as the National Emergency. I was in a friend's flat in Nizamuddin East for breakfast (I was just back from Aligarh where I relived the past while making the documentary *Papamian of Aligarh* where the Jamat-e-Islami members had threatened to smash our cameras because they were photographing "our" girls!) and was on my first social call in Delhi. But last night it had rained and my *chappals* were worn out at the heels. I slipped and fell on the cement floor taking my entire weight on my left hand. I felt stunned and had to be carried upstairs by my nephew, Anwar Azeem. Hot milk mixed with turmeric (*haldi*) revived me sufficiently to survey the damage which was, apparently, only bruises on the arm. Hence the misunderstanding that everyone who saw my arm in plaster the next day presumed that I had received a beating in Aligarh.

The X-ray specialist told me that the orthopaedic surgeon next door was not so good and that I should go to another specialist in far-off Daryaganj. I was escorted by Suresh Kohli, who besides being a poet and a publisher, was also the son of a doctor and hence knew all the tricks of the trade. He pooh-poohed the whole business of plastering, quoting his own experience of a scooter injury which had healed itself and I had to tell him the simple arithmetical difference between thirty-one and sixty-two. In any case we went to the orthopaedic surgeon who said after examining my wrist, "Well, to me it looks all right." I felt relieved and was prepared to pay him the thirty rupees for giving this opinion. But he got up and started preparing the plastering business.

I looked askance at Suresh. He merely shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Well, you didn't listen to me!" Twenty minutes later my left arm felt like lead but the doctor kindly made a sling in which it would rest cradled for the next three

weeks. The doctor said "Have another X-ray after three weeks." When we came back to the Press Club, I was quite a hero and did not bother to contradict the fantastic stories being circulated of how "veteran" Abbas was manhandled by Aligarh ruffians.

Next day I came to Bombay by the Frontier Mail (one of my idiosyncracies, whenever I have a lot of money I travel by ACC first class, the practical advantage is that I can finish a short story or a script during the twenty-four hour journey).

After exactly three weeks I went to a Bombay orthopaedic surgeon, and he said he would only give his opinion after seeing the new X-ray. So I went back to the X-ray specialist and had two X-rays taken, front and then profile, the report of which was promised the next day. We went the next day. The orthopaedic surgeon saw the X-rays and said, "The plaasters have to remain for another three weeks." By now I was really tired of it, for everyone solicitously enquired how it happened and what was worse was that I had no dramatic story to tell. I wished the Aligarh boys had really given me some blows—they almost did that but not quite.

Three more weeks passed and at last the orthopaedic surgeon agreed to cut the plaster. I felt very light—too light. I could fly in the air, I felt.

Then a clot in my brain began to misbehave. It got into places where it had no business to go. But, being a devotee of freedom, it insisted on its rights. The result was that one day when I went for a walk along the beach, I found I was dragging my left foot more and more. The left side seemed to grow weaker. This was a peculiar sensation. I cut short my walk and limped my way into Doctor Gandotra's clinic which is almost next door to my house. He gave me an injection but said I had to see a neurologist.

I got into my car and motored straight to my friend Inder Raj Anand. He was luckily in town, for so often he was in Madras writing some damn script or the other. He had had one major heart thrombosis, an odd attack of diabetes, and a permanent flirtation with gout. He studied medical books by the dozen and I would rather entrust myself to his care than to a doctor. He was a disciple of Baba Muktanand and was a student of S. Krishnamoorthy. In short there was nothing in the

physical or spiritual world that he did not know. So I went to his house, and induced by the doctor's injection or fright of the neurologist whom Inder had called, I collapsed on his bed and monopolized it for the next few weeks. Inder had heard of the reputation of a senior neurologist of Bombay Hospital, at some medical conference, and so he telephoned him. He was not available and so he called someone from the nearby Nanavati Hospital. The first words he spoke were "hospitalization"—and I have a dread of hospitalization as much from discipline and autocracy as anything else. All the while the doctor examined me I pretended to be asleep and after examination, he left. According to him I had had an "incident"—and I didn't know then that an "incident," or an episode, in medical terminology means a paralytic stroke.

Next day I agreed to go and see the senior neurologist. Inder and Sham went with me in their car and went up to the first floor and then down the corridor just with the help of a walking stick. A look at the neurologist and I knew here was not a doctor but a friend. And as, since childhood, I have been treated by Doctor Ansari, Hakim Ajmal Khan, and Dr Rehman, all friends of my father, and then by my own friend Dr Baliga, I am in favour of friendly doctors. The senior neurologist showed his friendship by allowing me to be carried to the fourth floor for the inauguration of the Urdu edition of my novel *Inqilab*. He said, "When the patient is so keen, invitations have already been issued, there is no point in denying the pleasure of an author in preventing his wish. But on one condition that, when it is all over, he must agree to hospitalization."

"Hospitalization?" I repeated.

"You can call it that. But I am interested in a series of tests which will only be done here."

Then it struck—call it emergency or an attack stroke. It happened characteristically at night.

I was at Inder's place, and while alone in my (his) bedroom, changing my trousers for the white pajamas, one leg in one and the other in the other, the creepy feeling came that, dammit, I can't move my left side, couldn't move at all. It was more absurd than tragic at first. I couldn't even shout as I lay there half on the bed, and half on the floor.

"Babul!" I cried out.

The hefty driver came in and immediately put me on the bed, heaving me like a sack of grain. Sham Bahen also came and ministered to the "fallen angel." Now I knew what paralysis was. It was eleven o'clock. We tried to ring up Dr Gandotra, but, for once, he had gone out for a party. Only when he came back, could he be contacted.

Tinnu (Inder's elder son) took his father's car and parked it in front of Dr Gandotra's place. Meanwhile they gave me a tranquillizer and I felt half sleepy. I had no pain—actually the absence of pain was pain enough. Was I to die like this?

The doctor came at about 1 a.m., gave me an injection, waited for the reaction, then gave me another injection—with all the injections my hip had become like a sieve. There was a joke which I wanted to share with the doctor, but half of my tongue was also paralyzed so I kept it to myself. Then, under the influence of the strong sedative I slept.

I had a dream—or a vision—or a hallucination—say what you will.

I saw that three men were dragging me out of the deadly swamp into which I had fallen. They were Bu Ali Shah Qalandar, Guru Nanak and Baba Muktanand. There was a reason why these three were in my subconscious. Bu Ali Shah Qalandar has been a part of my subconscious ever since my childhood and the "Three Graves in Panipat." The same was true of Guru Nanak whose birthday had just been celebrated and there was a large coverage on the television. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh poets had recited poems in his honour. Why Swami Muktanand came into the picture I had to sort out later.

The cock's crow woke me up and my left side felt cold. I used my left hand to cover myself and then I wondered. How could I use my left hand? It was paralyzed.

"Sham!" I shouted and then rang the bell.

Sham came running.

By now it was about 6-30 a.m.

"I didn't die after all. The doctor has saved me."

"The doctor and the Baba!"

"Which Baba?"

"See there—he was lying beside you all the time."

I saw the book which I could have sworn was the front

page up. Now it was back page up, where a portrait of Baba was smiling at me. Then I remembered the dream.

This was the research centre of Bombay Hospital. My wife had died in the opposite building where I was also taken for X-rays and an ECG. No wonder my blood pressure shot up. Even to Dr Singhal, when he expressed surprise at the high blood pressure, I couldn't explain what had happened to me when I went to the X-ray room and saw besides it, the signboard "Morgue." But Inder, who was present with me, guessed it and reminded me of Buddha's advice to the woman who wanted her dead child revived: "Bring me a few ashes from a hearth in a house where no one has ever died."

Hospitalization for tests or otherwise meant a series of doctors (Dr Singhal called all his specialist colleagues). Each came alone, with only his four assistants—a series of nurses who began their day at 6 a.m., a series of tasteless meals, the requirement of putting on a bloodstained hospital dress.

Sister De Souza.

"Yes, Sir."

Sister De Mello.

"Yes, Sir."

Sister Benedectine.

"Yes, Sir."

All from Goa or Trivandrum. Why?

Why no Sister Seeta?

Why no Sister Salmah?

Why no Sister Lakshmi?

Why no Sister Zainab?

One day, lying on a table while a brain-scanning test was going on, with nineteen electrodes plugged into my brain I felt secure, warm and sleepy. I dreamt that the Bombay Hospital was India, with the 20-Point Programme fully implemented. It was open to everyone, regardless of caste or creed, income or profession. In the dream the big doctor of the Hospital came to me with his four assistants. Pointing to one of them he said, "He will be successor."

"Is he your son?" I asked.

"No. He is not even remotely connected with me. Medicine is not Politics."

Then the dream ended, the plugs were withdrawn, and I

was free to go home.

As I came out of the hospital the driver of the car asked me, "Thank God. You are alive, Sir."

"Why? Did I look dead before?"

"If you will excuse my impertinence I would say yes. I heard two doctors. They were not giving you more than a week. What cured you?"

I said, "The senior neurologist, of course."

"Then what is this in your neck?"

I felt it. It was a small medallion on which a word in Arabic, *Allah*, was engraved. My left hand happened to touch a pile of books. On top of that was Baba Muktanand's *Chitshakti Vilas*. On its back cover it seemed to me that he was smiling encouragement to me. Beneath it was another book, *The Life of Lenin*. I knew Lenin was hearing the long short story by Jack London called "Love of Life" when he was dying. There was also a yellow silken cloth in which was wrapped the *prasad* that Mrs Kapoor (the mother-in-law-to-be of Inder's younger son Bittu) had specially brought for me from Amritsar. So what had saved me?

Was it the solicitude of my innumerable friends like Inder Gujral, Shaikh Abdullah and A.M. Tariq who both gave me their blessings, or friends like the Anands, Sathes, Sabirs, Karanjias, Krishenchanders, Sardar Jafri, Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Sunil Dutt, and the stunt men I used to meet on the beach?

Or was it allopathy which could cure TB but could not cure the common cold?

Homeopathy, the Dr Barlas' little sugar pills which I surreptitiously swallowed?

Ayurveda? "The Unani Hikmat of the late Hakim Ajmal Khan?

Or the love of my two sisters, one natural Muslim, the other adopted Hindu; one prays five times a day and each time asks *Allah* for His benediction for me, the other fasts and prays for me before the little temple; who were sitting by my side to give me comfort and support? Was it any of these, or *all* of them, or my sheer good luck and willpower which had conquered the little clot?

What am I then? A Muslim as all who know me believe?

A Vedantist Yogi as Baba Muktanand believes?

Am I a Christian? Who am I? What am I? Does anyone know? Can anyone know?

Am I a heretic, atheist or an agnostic?

A disbeliever in disbelief also?

The big doctor of the dream had said, "Good luck to you. May you never have to come here again."

"Are you breaking relations? Am I nothing to you but a name in a file?"

He said, "That is not what I mean. Come home by all means. We will all be glad to see you."

"We? Who are WE?"

"My wife, my son."

"Goodbye, Sir."

"Goodbye my friend."

The Bombay Hospital was India. It was the world!

Here I was involved in mankind. And mankind is involved in me. Ram and Mohamed, Gandhi and Goethe, Shakespeare and Shelley, Lenin and Jawaharlal Nehru, they were all part of me and I was a part of them.

In the meanwhile the clang-clang-clang of the Emergency Ambulance was heard. I did not know who it was and whether he was dead or alive. But it could have been *me*.

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